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FINDING MEANING IN THE AFTERMATH OF TRAUMA:
RESILIENCE AND POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH IN FEMALE SURVIVORS OF
INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

By

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Dissertation

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Ph.D.
in Clinical Psychology

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

Spring 2007

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Clinical Psychology

Finding Meaning in the Aftermath of Trauma: Resilience and Posttraumatic Growth in
Female Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence

Chairperson: Christine Fiore, Ph.D.

Despite recent interest in resiliency and growth in victims of trauma (Ryff, Singer, Love, & Essex, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), very few studies exist that document resilient responses to intimate partner violence, and none exist that explore posttraumatic growth in the aftermath of violent relationships. The purpose of this study was to explore resiliency and growth factors in women who were interviewed for the Domestic Violence Project at The University of Montana, which comprises an archival dataset. Participants were 127 women who had been out of a violent relationship for a year or more. As interview questions did not specifically target growth or resilience, relevant resiliency and growth themes were sought using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory of qualitative analysis.

Four categories of resilience and growth emerged: 1) resilience during the process of stay-leave decision-making, 2) resilience in the aftermath of a violent relationship, 3) growth that occurred during the process of stay-leave decision-making which may have served as the seeds of posttraumatic growth, and 4) posttraumatic growth. No single pattern emerged to explain women's experiences. Rather, participants reported several different pathways that led to varying degrees of resilience and growth.

Resilience during the process of stay-leave decision-making manifested as returns to baseline levels of confidence, renewed faith in personal strength, and/or motivation to renew "lost" aspects of one's identity. Other forms of growth that influenced stay-leave decision-making consisted of positive changes in relations to others, self-perception, cognitive appraisal of the violent relationship, coping, and intolerance to subsequent abusive behaviors. Participants reported that one or more of these resiliency or growth factors influenced their decisions to leave a violent partner. Resilience in the aftermath of a violent relationship consisted of renewed self-perceptions, return to baseline functioning in relationships, or renewed faith, spirituality, or religious beliefs. Posttraumatic growth occurred in the form of changes in relationships, self-perception, cognitive appraisal of the violent relationship, life goals, coping or behavior, or spiritual/religious beliefs. Findings were incorporated with existing research on resilience and posttraumatic growth and discussed in context of the study's limitations.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who made contributions to this project. Most importantly, I would like to thank Christine Fiore, Ph.D., my dissertation chair and program advisor, for her hard work, dedication, insight, and the use of her data for this project. Dr. Fiore has served as a wonderful mentor throughout my graduate school experience, both as a teacher, research advisor and clinical supervisor. Dr. Fiore's dedication to her students and to helping women through the Domestic Violence Project has been extremely inspiring to me, and I will always appreciate her support.

I would like to thank the other members of my committee, which includes David Schuldborg, Ph.D., Jennifer Waltz, Ph.D., Kimberly Wallace, Ph.D., and Rita Somers-Flanagan, Ph.D. for their hard work, insightful comments, and thoughtful consideration of this dissertation. I have had the additional pleasure of improving my research, clinical, and teaching skills under the guidance of these fine academicians and clinicians, for which I am extremely grateful. Additionally, I would like to thank Joanna Legerski, M.A., and the countless undergraduates under her guidance, who assisted with the organization of the data from the Domestic Violence Project. I would also like to thank Lauren Kelso, a dedicated and hardworking undergraduate student who assisted with data analysis on this dissertation. Moreover, I would like to thank my husband Dan for the unwavering love and support he has provided me during the past four years.

Finally, I would like to thank the women who contributed to the Domestic Violence Project for coming forward courageously to tell their stories. The bravery these women displayed by sharing their intensely difficult and painful experiences has inspired me both as a researcher and as a clinician to work towards learning how to help survivors of intimate partner violence to heal. Despite the fact that their stories were often painful to tell, these women nonetheless participated in the project in order to help other women and our larger society to understand the dangerous impact of intimate partner violence. I sincerely hope that the dissemination of the lessons these women learned will in some way contribute to their goal of helping other survivors to heal and eventually learn how to flourish again.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is violence that occurs between adult partners who are currently or were formerly cohabitating and/or sexually intimate (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 2005). According to Barnett et al., this more inclusive definition of partner abuse extends previous definitions of ‘domestic violence,’ ‘marital violence,’ and ‘spouse abuse’ to include violence that occurs between unmarried couples, same-sex couples, and couples who no longer co-habitate. Behaviors typically included in definitions of intimate partner violence are physical violence, sexual violence, threats of physical and sexual violence, psychological abuse, and stalking.

Researchers have estimated that IPV may occur in as few as 3% of married couples (Straus & Gelles, 1986) or in as many as 10-12% of either married or unmarried couples, with 6% of these acts classifying as severe (kicking, punching, biting, beating, and attacks with weapons; Straus & Gelles, 1990; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Others have estimated rates of IPV as high as 30% (Gelles, 1974) or even 60% (Walker, 1979). A recent meta-analysis revealed that the prevalence of IPV among unmarried cohabitators appears consistently to be two times higher than IPV that occurs in married couples (Brownridge & Halli, 2000). Rates of IPV in the few studies completed on same-sex couples vary, with some finding no difference in rates of violence between heterosexual and same-sex couples (Turell, 2000), and others finding much higher rates in both lesbian and gay male couples (Bernhard, 2000; Greenwood et al., 2002).

The true prevalence of IPV in the United States is extremely difficult to establish for several reasons outlined by Barnett et al. (2005). First, researchers often rely on self-

reports and official records to estimate the incidence of intimate partner violence. Official records only include intimate partner violence that has been reported to the authorities, and family violence often occurs within a context of secrecy, either to protect family members or because of fear of retribution by family members. Studies of IPV that utilize self-report surveys likely underestimate actual rates of violence because participants may forget to report notable experiences, choose not to report violence, or purposely deny the abuse. In addition, methodological problems, including a lack of standardized operational definitions for various forms of abuse across studies, the use of measures that are not cross-culturally applicable or which do not address pertinent cultural factors, the use of single assessment measures that are often invalid and unreliable, and the correlational nature of the majority of research that takes place in the field of family violence all complicate such estimates and render results potentially marginally meaningful and not generalizable.

Findings from self-report studies of married heterosexual couples have also emerged that suggest that spouses often report different outcomes of shared violent events. In particular, researchers have found that husbands may be more likely to underreport the frequency and severity with which they batter, and wives may be more likely to overreport perceived abuse by husbands, which renders true outcome estimates even more unclear (Jouriles & O'Leary, 1985; Szinovacz, 1983). Researchers have concluded that actual rates of IPV are likely much higher than estimates found in both official records and self-reports (Barnett et al., 2005).

The results of the two National Family Violence Surveys, which surveyed 2,143 married or divorced adults in 1975, and 3,520 married or unmarried and cohabitating

adults in 1985, both based on two separate national probability samples representative of population estimates for those years, revealed that men and women may be equally likely to perpetrate IPV within romantic relationships (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Straus & Gelles, 1986). This follows findings from other researchers that have revealed relative gender equivalence in the perpetration of IPV (Jouriles & O’Leary, 1985; Steinmetz, 1977). Further, Straus and Gelles found that wife-to-husband violence actually slightly increased in the ten years between each study.

Other researchers have found that females are far more likely to be victims of IPV than perpetrators (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Craven, 1997; Johnson, 2005; Makepeace, 1983; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), with women estimated as victims between 85% (Archer, 2000; Johnson, 2005) and 95% of the time (Pagelow, 1992). Older, cohabitating, and married women appear to be more at risk for violence by male partners than younger women in dating relationships (Archer, 2000). Women are particularly likely to be victims in cases where the violence is severe, sexual in nature, involves stalking, and when partners are unmarried cohabitators (Henning & Feder, 2004; Jouriles & O’Leary, 1985; Makepeace, 1983). One study of men and women who were arrested for perpetrating intimate partner violence found that male perpetrators are at much higher risk to continue to be violent in their relationships because they tend to perpetrate more frequent and severe violence against partners, they have stronger arrest histories, they more frequently violate protection orders and probation or parole requirements, they are more generally violent, they use more threats of homicide, suicide, or abandonment to control their partners, they tend to use more substances, they associate with a more

antisocial peer group, and they more often involve children in acts of IPV (Henning & Feder, 2004).

Despite controversy in the field, most family violence researchers acknowledge that the effects of intimate partner violence are often more devastating to women and children than to men (Archer, 2000; Barnett et al., 2005; Johnson, 2005; Makepeace, 1983; Straus & Gelles, 1986). The authors of both National Family Violence Surveys acknowledged that although women and men report perpetration of IPV relatively equally, the same violent act is almost always likely to result in more severe consequences for women, particularly in terms of serious injuries, given the typically larger physical stature and strength of men (Straus & Gelles, 1986). In addition, Straus and Gelles, as others (e.g., Pagelow, 1992; Saunders, 1986), have noted that a great deal of female violence towards males in intimate relationships is likely retaliatory or self-defensive rather than proactive in nature. This literature review will focus on the effects of IPV on female victims with male partners, as the majority of victimization studies have been conducted on this population, and because women have been shown to suffer the most adverse consequences of IPV.

The Process of Stay-Leave Decision-Making in Violent Relationships

Although many researchers tend to examine the negative outcomes of violent relationships, very few have documented how this experience might inspire eventual positive change or growth. An interim step also neglected in intimate partner violence research is an understanding of the complex processes that facilitate such change. It has been found that the experience of struggle and distress, and the emergence of positive change in female victims once they leave a violent relationship, both have roots in the

stay-leave decision-making process (Fiore Lerner & Kennedy, 2000; Kennedy, 1999; Paluso, 2003; Taylor, 2003).

Deciding whether to remain with or leave a violent partner represents a complex progression that occurs over time and which varies based on a dynamic interplay of individual, relational, environmental, and social factors (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Fiore Lerner & Kennedy, 2000). The process of leaving a violent relationship is often referred to as a journey made up of multiple cycles of leaving and returning before a more permanent break is made, with the assumption that each time the woman leaves and returns, she has grown psychologically and made steps towards a final departure (Brown et al., 2005; Ulrich, 1991). Women are often particularly psychologically and socially vulnerable after they first leave their violent partners, as during the first 6 months out of the relationship they tend to display poor coping and experience distressing trauma symptoms, lack of confidence about leaving, and strong temptation to return (Fiore Lerner & Kennedy, 2000). They also experience increased physical vulnerability, as laws and law enforcement often fail to protect them from stalking or injuries sustained by their ex-partner after they leave the violent relationship (Barnett et al., 2005). However, it is the throes of the struggle of whether to stay or to leave that the development of the essential cognitive and emotional processes needed for women to cope in the aftermath of their violent relationships occurs.

Why Women Stay in Violent Relationships

There are a host of reasons why women remain in violent relationships. One researcher who interviewed 51 women about their reasons for leaving abusive spouses found that they collectively described 86 reasons for leaving (Ulrich, 1991). Most women

report that they actually don't want to leave their violent partner; they just want the abuse to end (Landenburger, 1998), either because they love and are committed to their abuser (Strube & Barbour, 1983), because they think they can "save" the relationship, because they don't want to have wasted their time investing in a relationship only to start anew, or because they hope that the abuse will cease (Barnett et al., 2005). Others deny or minimize the violence in their relationship because the fear of being alone or living without the person they love can be devastating (Werner-Wilson et al., 2000). Indeed, victimization often occurs gradually, and most women describe the beginning of their eventually abusive relationships as positive and loving, reporting no concerns about violence (Mills, 1985).

Still others stay in violent relationships so that their children can retain a relationship with their father (Moss, Pitula, Campbell, & Halstead, 1997) or because they are financially dependent on their abuser and lack the resources or social support to live independently (Barnett et al., 2005; Gelles, 1976; Strube & Barbour, 1983; Werner-Wilson et al., 2000). In addition, many women stay because they have negative self-concepts and believe they deserve the abuse or that their behavior somehow contributed to its occurrence (Mills, 1985). According to Mills, loss of personal identity and the ability to look into one's life from the outside while in the midst of a violent relationship is common, as women in the throes of abuse often describe themselves as feeling numb, acting like a robot, or feeling dead inside.

The experience of fear and helplessness is common in victims of IPV (Barnett et al., 2005). Women report more frequently than men that IPV creates intense fear for themselves and their children, regardless of the type of abuse they experience (Gore-

Felton, Gill, Koopman, & Spiegel, 1999). Many victims stay in abusive relationships because they fear for their personal safety and the safety of their children (Ulrich, 1991). Fear in individuals who are consistently abused often can be explained as arising from classical conditioning and exposure to cues that are frequently associated with the violence (Foa et al., 1989), such as yelling, the smell of alcohol on the perpetrator's breath, or the time of day attacks most often occur. Eventually, fears that were initially bound to the violent situation may become more generalized, taking the form of avoidance of non-violent situations or hypervigilance directed at individuals formerly seen as trusted allies. Such fear can be paralyzing, particularly in the context of threats on one's life or a child's life, and can lead to profound feelings of helplessness.

In addition, the meanings that women attach to IPV often contribute to their decisions to remain in the violent relationship (Mills, 1985). According to Mills, women often define initial displays of violence in their relationships as aberrant events that are unlikely to occur again, largely due to their emotional commitment to the abuser. Minimization of the violence often occurs until women begin to view the violence as a consistent problem to be managed, which includes learning to protect oneself or change one's behaviors to try to avoid further abuse. Early in the management phase of the relationship, victims tend to see their abusers as the victim, often thinking of them as sick or out of control, rather than as agents of intentional harm. Women who experience new understandings of the dynamics within their abusive relationships by beginning to see them as problematic are more likely to attempt to leave permanently (Ulrich, 1991). The theme of finding meaning in the aftermath of a violent relationship will be discussed more in the section that follows on posttraumatic growth.

The Process of Leaving Violent Relationships

According to Landenburger (1998), most women initially leave violent relationships in order to send a message to their partner that they want the abuse to stop, rather than leaving with the goal of ending the relationship permanently. However, when battered women return to an abusive relationship, their abusers often become more intimidating and display less remorse for their behavior, which eventually leads to subsequent attempts to leave. Victims are more likely to leave if the violence is frequent and severe (Gelles, 1985), but many stay until some sort of catalyst or eye-opening event occurs, such as when children witness or become victims of abuse (Moss et al., 1997).

One team of researchers (Moss et al., 1997) found that in order to leave an abusive relationship successfully, victims often undergo a complex series of changes in their belief and cognitive appraisal systems. Women's beliefs about their relationship tend to change gradually over time, as their coping eventually improves to the point where they develop a new, more positive self-concept, which strengthens as it is validated by others. These changes in thought are often accompanied by intense anger, which often serves as a catalyst for change and a platform of strength (Mills, 1985).

However, such cognitive and emotional changes are dynamic and oscillating rather than progressing linearly, and women often vacillate between ambivalence and action as they enter various stages of coping while being battered (Mills, 1985). Fiore Lerner and Kennedy (2000) recently applied Prochaska and DiClemente's (1986) transtheoretical model of change to the stay-leave decision-making process of battered women. The transtheoretical model of change is a model of intentional behavior change made up of five stages. These stages include: 1) *precontemplation*, or having no interest

in, or intention to, change; 2) *contemplation*, thinking seriously about changing without taking action to change; 3) *preparation*, seriously considering imminent change; 4) *action*, when one is actively engaged in change; and 5) *maintenance*, when one has maintained the change for at least six months. Fiore Lerner and Kennedy found that women who were in the action phase, or who had been out of an abusive relationship for less than 6 months, were not confident about their decision to leave and were more tempted to return to the relationship, whereas women who were in the maintenance phase were more confident in their decision to leave and less tempted to return to a violent partner.

Similarly, a recent study by Murphy and Rosen (2006) explored 243 inpatient veterans who met criteria for PTSD. They applied a modified version of the transtheoretical model to this population, which was comprised of the same stages, but which incorporated more specific behavioral criteria: 1) *precontemplation*, or refusing to consider a particular behavior a problem; 2) *contemplation*, or thinking about changing a particular behavior; 3) *preparation*, seriously considering behavior change by allowing themselves to be educated about the process of therapy; 4) *action*, or engaging actively in treatment, skill-building, homework practice, and role-plays outside of treatment; and 5) *maintenance*, or continuing to maintain behavioral change by making lifestyle changes, seeking continuing support, and engaging in relapse prevention work. Murphy and Rosen found that combat veterans' readiness to change their PTSD symptoms was related to their decision to change old ways of thinking and behaving. Participants in the contemplation stage who began to recognize that they had symptoms of PTSD were more motivated to take action to learn new ways of coping with their symptoms.

Landenburger (1998) describes the process of leaving an abusive relationship as involving an extended period of grieving whereby a woman must mourn the loss of the relationship and all her associated hopes and dreams, the loss of social support networks that are often connected to her abuser, and the possible loss of a father to her children. This process often is fraught with distress and can lead to troubling symptoms of depression, fear, and/or anxiety. Indeed, Mitchell and Hodson (1983) found that survivors of IPV who display less active cognitive coping and more avoidance coping when they leave their abusers are more prone to develop severe depression, particularly if they have limited social support and fewer economic and personal resources.

One recent qualitative study explored fifteen African–American and fifteen Anglo-American women’s experiences of leaving abusive relationships (Moss et al., 1997). Moss et al. found that all of these victims underwent complex changes in the ways they cognitively appraised their relationship before they felt able to leave their abusers permanently. These included accepting that the relationship would not change and acknowledging that it was unhealthy, relinquishing romanticized notions of the idealized committed relationship, and accepting that the relationship with their abuser was likely to be ongoing if they had children together.

For the women in Moss et al.’s (1997) study, leaving an abusive relationship was a process made up of three phases. During the first phase, the women endured the abuse, blamed themselves for the abuse, and justified the abuser’s actions as a sickness rather than as intentional harm. At that point in their relationships, many of the women interviewed began to slowly recognize that the abuse was unhealthy and that it was not going to cease, largely by virtue of social influences outside the relationship. These

women moved into the second phase when some sort of catalyst motivated them to leave the relationship, despite the fact that leaving was often made more difficult by social or religious institutions that these women felt discouraged them for leaving their partners. The final phase consisted of identifying that these women had “lost themselves” in the relationship, and that they deserved to reclaim their identity and enhance the personal and professional skills that would help them function more independently. On a similar note, Ulrich (1991) found that women who leave violent relationships most frequently cite the need for personal growth as justification for this act, as opposed to a desire for safety.

Werner-Wilson et al. (2000), in qualitative interviews with an unreported number of women at a battered women’s shelter, found that women in their study had to accomplish the following tasks before they could successfully leave their abusive partners: 1) become aware that they were in an abusive relationship, particularly if the abuse was emotional; 2) gain a sense of self separate from prescribed roles as a wife and a mother; 3) feel hopeful that their life would improve if they left the relationship; 4) learn about available resources that could assist with their difficult transition; 5) identify a safe place for themselves and their children once they left their abuser; and 6) attend therapy in order to achieve all of the above tasks. In another qualitative study of ten women who had left an abusive relationship, victims additionally reported that before they could permanently leave, they had to stop blaming themselves and come to the conclusion that their abuser was to blame for the violence (Mills, 1985).

Finally, Fiore Lerner and Kennedy (2000) interviewed 191 Montana women as part of the Domestic Violence Project at The University of Montana who were

1) currently involved in a violent relationship with no intention of leaving, 2) currently involved in a violent relationship and thinking about leaving, and 3) had left their violent relationship over time periods extending from six months to three years or more. Their goal was to discern what factors played a key role in women's decisions to stay in or leave their violent relationships. Through qualitative interviews and quantitative ratings of trauma symptoms, self-efficacy, coping skills, confidence about leaving, and temptation to stay, these authors found that women who had most recently left violent relationships displayed more problem- and emotion-focused coping than women who had been out of violent relationships for a year or more. Women who had been out of violent relationships for longer overall tended to display problem-focused, as opposed to emotion-focused, coping.

Although problem-focused coping predicted women's increased confidence about leaving their relationships in Fiore Lerner and Kennedy's (2000) study, whose sample partially comprised the sample under study in this dissertation, women who had most recently left their violent relationships nonetheless struggled the most with temptations to return and feelings of low confidence about their decision to leave. In addition, this subgroup of women reported more trauma symptoms, more frequent dissociation, and more sleep disturbances than women who had been out of a violent relationship for more than a year. Fiore Lerner and Kennedy hypothesized that the high levels of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping these women reported utilizing throughout their stay-leave decision-making process likely led to a greater demand on their emotional resources, increasing their vulnerability to distressing symptoms.

Outcomes of Violent Relationships: Distress, Trauma, and Coping

Several authors have documented the negative outcomes that can occur once women make the difficult decision to leave a violent partner. According to Barnett et al. (2005), IPV can result in a host of negative outcomes, including homicide, reactive aggression, physical illness, injury, and neurological, cognitive, and emotional changes associated with injury, fear conditioning, and physical or emotional deprivation. Traumatic events increase an individual's risk to develop a mental disorder (Roy-Byrne, Geraci, & Uhde, 1986); not surprisingly, clinical depression, anxiety disorders, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are commonly experienced by IPV victims (Barnett et al., 2005). However, outcomes of IPV vary based on the frequency, severity, and form of abuse and the complex interplay of individual and interpersonal dynamics that contribute to the development and maintenance of the violence (Briere & Jordan, 2004).

Common emotional reactions to IPV include extreme stress, low self-esteem, anger, self-blame, isolation, and depression. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), feelings of guilt and shame are also common, as is the development of generalized anxiety and specific fears. Foa, Steketee, and Rothbaum (1989) explained that prolonged exposure to trauma-related cues during a traumatic event can eventually elicit generalized anxiety reactions that occur outside of the violent context, such as an exaggerated startle response in the presence of sudden loud noises. These associations occur because individuals experiencing prolonged stress often become physiologically hyper-aroused, rendering it simple to trigger emotional reactions similar to those associated with the trauma in non-dangerous situations. Avoidance of both non-dangerous and dangerous situations is common because it brings short-term relief; however, such avoidance often

worsens and prolongs anxiety symptoms. These reactions are common in individuals who have experienced trauma, and do not necessarily result in functional impairment, prolonged distress, or a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

IPV, Trauma, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse within a romantic relationship are often extraordinarily traumatizing to victims, and many suffer concurrent or subsequent stress reactions. Researchers have discerned that individuals who perceive traumatic events as life-threatening and of monumental significance are more at risk to develop full-blown Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; Foa et al., 1989). The diagnosis of PTSD emerged in the third version of the *DSM* in 1980 after military troops returned from the Vietnam War and began to experience adverse anxiety reactions that included hyperarousal, avoidance, and re-experiencing symptoms (Courtois, 2004). This diagnosis incorporated earlier descriptions of ‘shellshock’ (Fenton, 1926) and ‘combat neurosis’ (Weinberg, 1946). Since 1980, researchers have found evidence of PTSD and PTSD-like symptoms in other populations who have been faced with the threat of death or serious injury, such as rape survivors, abused children, and victims of intimate partner violence (Courtois, 2004).

Current diagnostic criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD include experiencing, witnessing, or being confronted with a traumatic event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of the self or others, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV – Text Revision* (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Traumatic events that can lead to the development of PTSD are defined in the *DSM-IV-TR* as extreme occurrences that are

unlikely to occur frequently. They include violent personal assaults, military combat, being kidnapped or taken hostage, experiencing torture, terrorist attack, natural or manmade disasters, severe accidents, or being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. According to the American Psychiatric Association, an individual's likelihood of developing PTSD increases as the intensity of the stressor increases, and when physical proximity to the stressor increases. PTSD symptoms are particularly severe or prolonged when the traumatic event is enacted by human design, such as a rape or a violent assault.

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2000), in order to meet criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD, an individual must endorse ongoing symptoms that extend one month beyond the trauma(s)'s completion, related feelings of helplessness, intense fear, or horror, and significant levels of distress or associated functional impairment. Victims often display *re-experiencing symptoms*, such as nightmares, recurrent and intrusive thoughts about the trauma(s), flashbacks, and intense distress or physiological reactivity when exposed to associated cues; *avoidance symptoms*, which include sense of a foreshortened future, restricted range of affect, efforts to avoid, thoughts, feelings, people, and stimuli associated with the trauma, inability to recall particular aspects of the trauma, feelings of estrangement from others, and markedly diminished interest in activities that were previously enjoyed; and *arousal symptoms*, which include an exaggerated startle response, hypervigilance, difficulty sleeping, irritability or anger, and difficulty concentrating.

It is estimated that up to 60% of IPV victims meet criteria for PTSD when they seek treatment (Saunders, 1994), which stands in marked contrast to the 8% lifetime prevalence rate reported in the *DSM-IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Specific risk factors have been identified that may distinguish between those individuals who develop PTSD following traumatic events and those who do not. According to a recent meta-analysis, individuals who appear to be at greatest risk to develop PTSD following a trauma tend to have a history of repeated childhood abuse, family members with one or more psychiatric disorders, and a lack of social support (Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000). In addition, neuroticism, coupled with the development of a negative world view following trauma, often leads to symptoms of PTSD (Bramsen, van der Ploeg, van der Kamp, & Adèr, 2002; Briere & Jordan, 2004), as do premorbid psychological symptoms and substance abuse problems (Briere & Jordan, 2004). Other less conclusive risk factors include low educational attainment, parental trauma, a history of previous trauma or general childhood adversity, introversion, prior psychiatric disorder(s), being a female between the ages of 36-50, and race (Fairbank, Schlenger, Saigh, & Davidson, 1995).

Protective factors that act against the development of PTSD in victims of IPV have not been specifically identified at this time. However, protective factors that buffer against the development of PTSD in female and male Vietnam veterans include high levels of social support and cognitive factors such as high levels of commitment, feeling a sense of control over one's circumstances, and viewing life changes as challenges rather than as adversity (King, King, Fairbank, Keane, & Adams, 1998). Another recent study of Albanian immigrants and aide workers and refugees from Kosovo found that higher levels of optimism, problem-focused coping, and extraversion predicted improved adjustment following trauma (Riolli, Savicki, & Cepani, 2002).

Complex PTSD

Recently, researchers have begun to note the complexity of responses victims endorse following interpersonally violent experiences. Although many women are likely to meet criteria for PTSD as a result of intimate partner violence, this diverse symptom cluster does not always explain the complicated residual mental health effects of interpersonal violence (Briere & Jordan, 2004). In 1992, Judith Herman attempted to elucidate this phenomenon by postulating the existence of *complex PTSD*, which she described as less event-specific victimization syndrome that leads to a wider variety of symptoms and consequences than that seen in PTSD. Courtois (2004) described complex PTSD (CPTSD) as resulting from “trauma that occurs repeatedly and which escalates over its duration” (p. 412), although she noted that CPTSD can also occur following a single, calamitous traumatic event. Since Herman’s initial conceptualization, complex PTSD has also been referred to as *disorder of extreme stress* (DES), *disorder of extreme stress not otherwise specified* (DESNOS), *complicated PTSD*, and *complex trauma* (Courtois, 2004).

Herman (1992) first noted the presence of complex PTSD in abused children who suffered prolonged, severe, and repeated interpersonal victimization. Others have since described the presence of complex trauma in children who have been maltreated by caregivers or exposed to family violence (Cook et al., 2005) and to children who have been sexually abused (Hall, 1999). Spinazzola et. al (2005) found that complex trauma symptoms in children and adolescents were most often related to prolonged emotional abuse, the loss of a family member, being raised by an impaired caregiver, witnessing

domestic violence, and experiencing sexual assault, neglect, or physical abuse (in that order).

Others have since extended the concept of complex PTSD to adult populations, including adults with a history of physical and/or sexual abuse (Roth, Newman, Pelcovitz, van der Kolk, & Mandel, 1997), combat veterans (Ford, 1999), Jewish Holocaust survivors (Kellermann, 1999), and female inpatients hospitalized for the treatment of severe trauma (Allen, Huntoon, & Evans, 2000). However, according to Ford (1999), combat veterans seem to experience much lower levels of CPTSD than adults who have suffered trauma at the hands of someone with whom they have an emotional connection. Combat veterans who do suffer from CPTSD tend to have also experienced childhood trauma and to report impaired object relations, possibly as a result of early interpersonal trauma. Ford concluded that interpersonal trauma is likely a key differentiating factor between PTSD and CPTSD.

Individuals with complex PTSD nearly always meet criteria for PTSD, but also tend to suffer a range of other mental health problems as a result of the severe and/or frequent nature of the trauma they have experienced (Courtois, 2004; Roth et al., 1997). According to Herman (1992), these additional difficulties include: 1) alterations in attention and consciousness (i.e., dissociation), 2) alterations in self-perception, 3) alterations in systems of meaning, 4) alterations in perceptions of perpetrators, 5) chronic difficulties with boundaries of identity and interpersonal awareness, 6) somatic and medical problems, and 7) affective dysregulation associated with self-destructive behaviors.

Research support for the construct of CPTSD, and to distinguish between PTSD and CPTSD, is limited but promising. Roth et al. (1997) conducted a *DSM-IV* field trial to determine base rates of complex trauma amongst male and female victims of childhood physical and/or sexual abuse. Their goal was to determine the feasibility of a constellation of trauma symptoms not addressed by the PTSD criteria at the time. Using a structured interview for Disorders of Extreme Stress, the Potential Stressor Events Interview, the Structured Clinical Interview for the DSM-III-R, and the Diagnostic Interview Schedule, they assessed 234 male and female individuals ages 12-75 presenting to a mental health clinic for treatment, and 308 randomly selected adults across two states who both admitted to experiencing a “high magnitude stressor,” for symptoms of both PTSD and CPTSD. After individuals were screened for the presence of at least one past or present high magnitude stressor, a total of 234 participants were included in the study.

Seventy percent of participants in Roth et al.’s (1997) study met criteria for PTSD. Of these individuals, Roth et al. found that 72% also met criteria for CPTSD. CPTSD symptoms were most likely to occur in individuals, particularly women, who had suffered both sexual and physical abuse in childhood, or sexual abuse alone, at a rate of nearly *fifteen times* more than individuals who suffered only physical abuse.

Although Roth et al. (1997) concluded that the construct of CPTSD appeared to be distinct from PTSD, changes were only made to the “associated descriptive features” of PTSD rather than to the criteria for PTSD in the text revision of the *DSM-IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). These authors stated that further research should address the experience of complex trauma in individuals who have suffered concurrent sexual and physical abuse, or sexual abuse alone, in childhood. Because

CPTSD symptoms were more closely associated with sexual abuse than physical abuse in their study, these authors suggested that sexual abuse is likely a stronger risk factor for the development of CPTSD, and may underlie the problems seen in this population with affective regulation, problematic self-definition, and interpersonal functioning. Roth et al. explained that CPTSD symptoms may be a somewhat common outcome in this population because sexual assaults often involve intense shame and secrecy, extreme boundary violations, and the use of coping through dissociation. The finding that child sexual abuse victims often display symptoms of CPTSD was later corroborated by Hall (1999), who found that children who experienced more incidents of sexual abuse exhibited both symptoms of PTSD and CPTSD at a rate of twice those who did not meet criteria for PTSD.

Trauma, Biology, and Cognition

It has been found that traumatic events strongly impact biological systems, often in the form of arousal and somatic symptoms (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Bessel van der Kolk (2001) explained that PTSD symptoms disrupt and reorganize the body's homeostatic controls by producing "a cascade of biobehavioral changes" involving a victim's brain chemistry (p. S50). He noted that such changes are particularly evident in 1) the brain stem, which regulates breathing and heart rate; 2) the corpus callosum, which allows for hemispheric transfer of information; 3) the amygdala, which evaluates information for emotional significance; 4) the hippocampus, which is responsible for the cognitive mapping of memories; 5) the anterior cingulate, which is believed to amplify and filter cognitions and emotions; 6) the orbitofrontal cortex, which provides information about environmental stimuli to several areas within the frontal cortex; and

7) the prefrontal cortex, which is involved in learning, planning, problem-solving, and organizing complex mental experiences.

According to van der Kolk (2001), the body quickly becomes conditioned to respond to trauma-related stimuli by displaying heightened physiological arousal, particularly following situations in which a trauma is severe or consists of a repeated series of acts. Victims often avoid such stimuli and thinking about or experiencing associated intense emotions in order to avoid arousal symptoms. Van der Kolk speculated that this form of avoidance can lead to more intrusive thoughts about the trauma and a continued state of physiological hyperarousal. In the absence of treatment, endogenous opioids often help numb a victim's distress over time, which may explain why PTSD symptoms appear to lessen on their own with time.

In addition to the extensive biobehavioral changes that occur in victims following their experience of trauma, researchers have theorized that traumatic events often lead to changes in the way a victim thinks about herself, the world, and others (Briere & Jordan, 2004; Epstein, 1991; Foa et al., 1999; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991). Depending on the frequency and severity of the trauma, cognitive changes can persist for quite some time once the event has ended or after traumatic stimuli are removed from one's environment (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). McCann and Pearlman (1990) theorized that although psychological responses to trauma often appear to be "symptoms," in actuality they may be temporary and changing reactions enacted by individuals as they attempt to make sense of and integrate the trauma into their existing beliefs and larger life context.

Schwartzberg and Janoff-Bulman (1991) noted that traumatic events often lead victims to realize that their previously held notions of control and meaningfulness shatter

when they begin to realize that chance often plays a greater role in their lives than they previously perceived. Traumatic events can lead individuals to question their self-worth and change previously-held beliefs that the world is a just or benevolent place.

Researchers have found that prior to the occurrence of traumatic events, most individuals tend to espouse the “just-world” hypothesis, i.e., that the world is a benevolent place and that terrible events only occur as a result of chance, and could never happen to them (Marhoefer-Dvorak, Resick, Kotsis Hutter, & Girelli, 1988). Such beliefs are ostensibly comforting because they validate individual hopes that the universe is predictable and lawful. However, traumatic events often severely disrupt the way victims view the world by shattering their beliefs in a just world (Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991). Epstein (1991) suggested that the following core beliefs tend to change after one undergoes a traumatic experience: the belief that the world is meaningful, that the world is benign, that the self is worthy, and that others are trustworthy.

Marhoefer-Dvorak et al. (1988) found that one sample of rape victims who viewed the world as just and benevolent before being raped tended to blame themselves for the trauma, as they had never believed it possible that they could be raped. Younger individuals may be particularly vulnerable to such worldviews, as generational studies show that adults over 25 tend to view their life experience as more just and within their control (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 1998). Yet such alterations of belief are not experienced by all trauma survivors, as reactions are diverse and vary based on a dynamic interplay of pretrauma psychological and sociodemographic characteristics of victims, the nature of the trauma, and post-trauma environmental characteristics, such as levels of social support (Fairbank et al., 1995; McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

The Role of Social Support in the Processing of Trauma. Contextual and environmental variables, such as social support, can strongly influence the way victims cognitively process and cope with traumatic events (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Guay, Billette, & Marchand, 2006; Lepore, 2001). Lepore (2001) found that a primary predictor of emotional adjustment in individuals with cancer was the perceived quality of their interpersonal relationships. In his summary of empirical studies on adjustment following a cancer diagnosis, Lepore found that talking with others about one's experience may facilitate cognitive processing of that experience by decreasing intrusive thoughts and by helping cancer patients feel more accepted and understood.

Williams and Joseph (1999) noted that an individual's appraisal of a traumatic event is influenced by the feedback she receives from others about her associated cognitions, feelings, and behavior. In other words, if a survivor of IPV explains her decision to leave the violent relationship to a friend who validates her perception of the event by stating she would have reacted to the event in the same way, the survivor may come to view her own actions as acceptable. In turn, she is more likely to feel confident about her actions, to cope better, and to be less likely to develop troubling symptoms that could lead to PTSD, such as avoidance of thinking about the trauma. If, however, a friend invalidates the survivor's actions, the survivor may feel increased shame, confusion, and fear about her decisions. Following such invalidating responses from their social support networks, survivors are likely to avoid thinking about the trauma and to disclose less about their related thoughts and feelings, which could make them more vulnerable to symptoms such as avoidance and hyperarousal (Lepore, 2001).

Lepore (2001) hypothesized that PTSD symptoms often arise in individuals with inadequate social support because in the absence of feeling they can disclose to others, they begin to have intrusive thoughts about the trauma, which maintains their poorly adapted response to the situation. Ehlers and Clark (2000) explained that individuals in a victim's social support network often respond to trauma survivors by avoiding talking to them about their trauma, either because they are uncertain how they should respond to that friend, or because they don't want to cause the survivor further distress. Under circumstances such as this, social support can be perceived as invalidating to the trauma victim. When survivors interpret this avoidance as a sign that this friend does not care about what happened to them, or that the friend blames them for their victimization, they may be more likely to become socially withdrawn and less likely to process their trauma in the presence of others. As has already been explained, avoidance of processing cognitions and emotions associated with a trauma can increase intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and arousal symptoms, and increase an individual's risk for PTSD.

Indeed, it is known that when trauma survivors blame themselves for their actions, they avoid social interactions more and seek out less dissenting opinions from others (Brewin, McCarthy, & Furnham, 1989). It has also been found that negative social reactions following disclosure about the details of traumatic events are related to a greater number of PTSD symptoms in survivors of sexual assault (Ullman & Filipas, 2001). Andrews, Brewin, and Rose (2003) found that the greater number of PTSD symptoms found among women can be partly explained by the fact that they report more negative responses about their related actions from friends and family members than do men.

Trauma, Resilience, and Post-Traumatic Growth

Although negative outcomes of violent relationships are most often the subject of research studies, a recent trend in the grief, bereavement, and victimization literature has been a focus on the positive self-change that a significant number of individuals report in the aftermath of trauma (Mackler, 1998; O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Paton, Violanti, & Smith, 2003; Taylor, 1983; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Some authors have suggested that between 40-70% of individuals who have faced highly stressful life events believe that at least something positive emerged from the experience (Affleck, Tennen, & Gershman, 1985). Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) recently remarked that, anecdotally, there are often far more reports of growth than of disorder in the aftermath of trauma, although researchers often focus on the latter.

The interest in how individuals thrive in the aftermath of trauma, or derive meaning from events that change their perspectives and subsequent behaviors, is rooted in the positive psychology movement. Positive psychology is the study of positive character, positive emotions, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychologists study well-being in order to understand what allows individuals to flourish under stressful circumstances, rather than focusing on human weakness, suffering, and pathology, as is common in the mental health field (Ryff & Singer, 1998; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Prominent researchers in the positive psychology field have recently begun to examine character strengths and virtues that influence individuals to thrive, be happy, and feel fulfilled (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These traits and virtues include: 1) cognitive strengths that entail learning and the use of knowledge; 2) emotional strengths that include the use of motivation to achieve

goals despite opposition; 3) interpersonal strengths that encourage connectedness and cooperation; 4) civic strengths that contribute to one's ability to positively impact the community; 5) the ability to protect against extremes of behavior, emotion, and cognition; and 6) spiritual connections to larger principles that encourage the facilitation of meaning.

The emergent process of growth and change following traumatic events has been referred in several forms in the grief, bereavement, and victimization literature. Researchers have long noted the ability to bounce back from adversity, or the *resilience* of battered women (Werner-Wilson et al., 2000), individuals with PTSD (Davidson et al., 2005), refugees and immigrants (Riolfi et al., 2002), and children with health problems (Bartelt, 1994; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1991; McCord, 1994). Park, Cohen, and Murch (1996) have referred to the collective positive outcomes of stressful events as *stress-related growth*, an effect which is typified by improvements in coping skills and enhancements in both personal and social resources. O'Leary and Ickovics (1995) described the process of *thriving* in the face of stress or trauma as effectively mobilizing individual and social resources in response to a threat.

Other researchers have noted the *perceived benefits* (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1991) and the *benefit-finding* (Affleck & Tennen, 1996) process victims undergo as result of experiencing traumatic events, such as viewing oneself as more capable, experiencing changed relationships, life philosophies, and priorities (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1991). Finally, Taylor and Brown (1988) noted that mentally healthy individuals may distort reality to the degree that they espouse *positive illusions* about themselves, others, and the world in order to cope with adverse life circumstances. According to these authors,

although positive illusions may not be reflective of one's true circumstances, they promote positive well-being and mental health in the form of motivation, self-esteem, optimism, and productivity.

Resilience

The concept of resilience is perhaps the most researched topic relating to how individuals recover and flourish following traumatic events. Moderate disagreement exists in the field of psychology in regards to how to adequately define the concept of "resilience." Masten et al. (1991) described resilience as successful adaptation to stressful circumstances. Anthony (1974) defined resilience as successful coping as a result of one's own efforts, strength, initiative, and endurance, similar to Bartelt's (1994) notion of resilience as a quality which allows individuals to make success a reality in the face of adversity. McCord (1994) described resilience as the degree to which an individual thrives, rather than avoids change, in response to a novel life circumstance. In their review of resilience in aging individuals, Ryff et al. (1998) conceptualized this construct as the capacity of aging persons to stay well, recover, or potentially improve in the face of accumulating challenges.

Although definitions of resilience differ slightly, they share a few essential components: 1) the capacity of individuals to "bounce back" following adverse events and succeed despite a predicted negative outcome; 2) the ability to adapt or change with harsh or negative life circumstances; and 3) the capacity for ongoing engagement with the risk factor, as opposed to avoidance (Werner-Wilson et al., 2000). Many researchers view resilience as an intrinsic capacity or an advantageous personality trait that facilitates the effective utilization of personal resources and competencies to positively manage

demands, challenges, and changes following stressful life events (Anthony, 1974; Bartelt, 1994; McCord, 1994; Paton et al., 2003). According to Paton et al. (2003), implicit in the notion of resilience is the idea that individuals can and do return to prior levels of functioning after the trauma, on the basis of an intrinsic quality that makes their responses more adaptive than most. This intrinsic quality has been referred to by other researchers as hardiness (Bartone, 2003; Kobasa, 1979).

Hardiness has been defined as a relatively stable tendency or personality style characterized by the ability to anticipate and cope with life stress by acting on one's environment vigorously with a clear and strong sense of one's goals, values, and capabilities (Kobasa, 1979). According to Kobasa, hardy individuals are committed wholeheartedly to their actions and have a strong sense of purpose because they have an internal locus of control, they act vigorously to make things happen, and they view their actions as meaningful and part of a larger life plan. Bartone (2003) speculated that individuals with high levels of hardiness are more resistant to the negative effects of various life stressors because they are optimistic, they have the courage to live fully and to cope well despite adversity, and the ability to cognitively construct positive meanings from life events. He noted that hardy individuals are likely to view life as a worthwhile and interesting challenge that allows them multiple opportunities for growth and enhancement. In a 2000 study of post-combat Gulf War veterans, Bartone found that individuals with high levels of hardiness had fewer symptoms in highly stressful situations than with low levels of hardiness, regardless of high levels of combat exposure in both groups.

The one known study to examine resilience in violent relationships found that women demonstrate a resilient response to IPV when they have made the final decision to leave their abuser, and thus to create positive change in their lives (Werner-Wilson et al., 2000). Werner-Wilson et al. studied identified three groups of women through a women's shelter: 1) women who were currently living at the shelter, 2) women who had left their abusive relationship at least one year prior, and 3) women who were identified by staff as having enacted a resilient response to spousal abuse. These researchers interviewed each woman in a focus group setting about the causes of family violence, the reasons they had stayed in the abusive relationship, the reasons why women left their relationship, and what their needs consisted of before and after they left the relationship. They found that women who had been out of abusive relationships for the longest period of time had the most clarity and sophisticated understanding of the dynamics that had led them to be involved in a violent relationship, such as how their history of violence in childhood had led them to choose a partner similar to a previous abuser. The least resilient women were more likely to use avoidant coping strategies and to experience greater levels of psychological distress, a finding which was later replicated in a study of 102 women over 60 with lifetime histories of at least one interpersonal trauma (Higgins, 2000).

Werner-Wilson et al. (2000) additionally found that resilience in women who leave violent relationships is associated with a dynamic interplay of personal characteristics and supportive relationships. Women's responses to questions about why they decided to leave suggested that active and difficult struggle characterized resilient responses, such as having to change one's appearance or defy one's abuser in the presence of his family members. Resilient women were additionally quite proactive in

seeking out the social support they needed in order to leave, despite often facing extreme isolation and lack of chances to meet with others outside the relationship. For the women deemed resilient, social support facilitated the process of leaving, regardless of whether that support derived from family members, the partner's family members, or friends. In another study conducted on 17 rural female survivors of intimate partner violence, survivors reported that the most healing relationships with both peers and professionals during their struggle with stay-leave decision-making were characterized by authenticity, mutuality, consistency, and attunement to one's unique needs (Bradway, 2001).

Posttraumatic Growth

In 1991, Calhoun and Tedeschi began to examine research that suggests some individuals perceive beneficial outcomes following highly stressful or negative events. Although these perceived benefits vary by individual and based on the situation, these authors found that following traumatic events, a significant number of individuals report feelings of growth, perceptions of themselves as more capable, and changes in life philosophy, relationships, and priorities. Many survivors of trauma additionally report feeling as if they have grown emotionally as a result of their ordeal (Affleck et al., 1985). Calhoun and Tedeschi likened their conception of *perceived benefits* to Taylor and Brown's (1988) idea that *positive illusions* following a tragedy can help individuals find the strength to heal, while protecting their sense of control, hope, and self-efficacy.

More recently, Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998) labeled this phenomenon *posttraumatic growth*, which they defined as the experience of positive change that occurs by virtue of the struggle with highly stressful and challenging life circumstances. They later described posttraumatic growth as "a significant beneficial change in cognitive

and emotional life beyond previous levels of adaptation, psychological functioning, or life awareness” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2003, p. 12). In the latter article, they explained that the changes which occur in the aftermath of trauma often challenge previously existing assumptions about one’s self, others, and the future, and lead to the development of new ways of thinking about one’s experience. In order for this to occur, the traumatic event(s) must be severe enough to produce a significant reassessment of previously-held assumptions (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998).

Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun (1998) noted that *posttraumatic growth* is different from other terms that describe change following a trauma, such as *thriving*, *stress-related growth*, *positive illusions*, *flourishing*, and *perceived benefits*. They noted that the terms *positive illusions* and *perceived benefits* imply that the growth reported by some individuals after trauma is not necessarily real, but merely a matter of perception. As perceptions and illusions can be erroneous, and because illusions are often a coping mechanism rather than a behavioral outcome, they felt that such terminology did not take into account the substantial number of beneficial cognitive, affective, and behavioral transformations reported by individuals in the aftermath of trauma. In a 1996 study, Tedeschi and Calhoun found evidence to corroborate this theory. Upon examination of a sample of 54 men and women who reported at least one severe major trauma in the past year, and 63 men and women who reported no trauma in the past year, these authors found that the ability of individuals who had experienced severe trauma to seek social support, make life changes reflective of new possibilities, and view oneself as more capable than previously imagined in times of stress far exceeded such abilities in

individuals who had not suffered severe trauma. They concluded that posttraumatic growth is thus more than just a self-enhancing bias.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2003) additionally noted that the term *stress-related growth* does not take into account the fact that the major changes which occur in individuals following a trauma are most common in conditions of severe crisis rather than in conditions of low-level “stress,” and that the terms *flourishing* and *thriving* do not imply a shattering of fundamental schemas as has been described by individuals following their experience of severe psychological trauma. In addition, these authors noted that *posttraumatic growth* differs from *resilience* in that resilience implies a return to prior levels of functioning following a trauma, whereas posttraumatic growth is a significant, positive change in emotional and cognitive functioning that supercedes previous levels of adaptation, psychological functioning, or life awareness (Tedeschi et al., 1998). In other words, resilience does not necessitate growth so much as a successful return to baseline functioning, or successful coping through a difficult circumstance. Posttraumatic growth, on the other hand, involves transformation or a qualitative change in functioning (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2003). However, these authors acknowledged that there is likely a connection between posttraumatic growth and resilience, although this difference has not been specifically identified in empirical studies.

Posttraumatic growth is assessed in multiple ways. Quantitative methods include the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), a self-report method comprised of 21 positively-worded items indicative of five underlying factors that are assumed to be outcomes of posttraumatic growth: 1) relating to others; 2) new possibilities; 3) personal strength; 4) spiritual change; and 5) appreciation of life. These

five factors have since been labeled as subscales, each of which has been found to be reliable in empirical studies. Although it has been suggested that self-report measures of posttraumatic growth be validated by significant others in the survivors' life, no studies have attempted this strategy as a way of corroborating actual growth (Cohen, Hettler, & Pane, 1998). Qualitative measures of posttraumatic growth include unstructured interviews and observations of therapy sessions (Cohen et al., 1998).

The Process of Posttraumatic Growth. According to Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun (1998), posttraumatic growth is both a process and an outcome. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995, 2004) noted that posttraumatic growth does not occur immediately following a traumatic event, but rather, it develops gradually as the victim struggles to process the trauma cognitively and emotionally. Although subsets of individuals have described “quantum” changes that occur in the immediate aftermath of trauma, characterized by abrupt and revelatory alterations in present concerns and dramatic changes in personality, life philosophy, and worldview (Miller & C’deBaca, 1994), Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) noted that such experiences seem to be the exception, rather than the rule, for individuals who report growth in the aftermath of trauma.

According to Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998), posttraumatic growth is influenced by an interaction of multiple individual, environmental, and social factors. In their functional-descriptive model of posttraumatic growth, these authors outlined several pretrauma characteristics define individuals who are most likely to grow in the aftermath of trauma (see Figure 1, inset, for an outline of the posttraumatic growth model). Individuals prone to growth often experience at least moderate levels of well-being and hope. They are prone to dispositional optimism, in addition to a complex cognitive style

characterized by extraversion and openness to experience (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Tennen & Affleck, 1998). These individuals have the ability to be open to and tolerant to new feelings and experiences, have a tendency towards activity rather than passivity, and tend to be creative in their problem-solving efforts. Other pro-growth factors include self-confidence, an easygoing disposition, ego resiliency, and prior experience with life crises from which they effectively build upon to strengthen their coping resources (Schaefer & Moos, 1998). Humor may also play a role in coping, as some argue that humor reflects a realization of some superiority in ourselves relative to others or compared with our former selves, and that it may facilitate cognitive reframing, social support-seeking, and communication (Moran & Shakespeare-Finch, 2003).

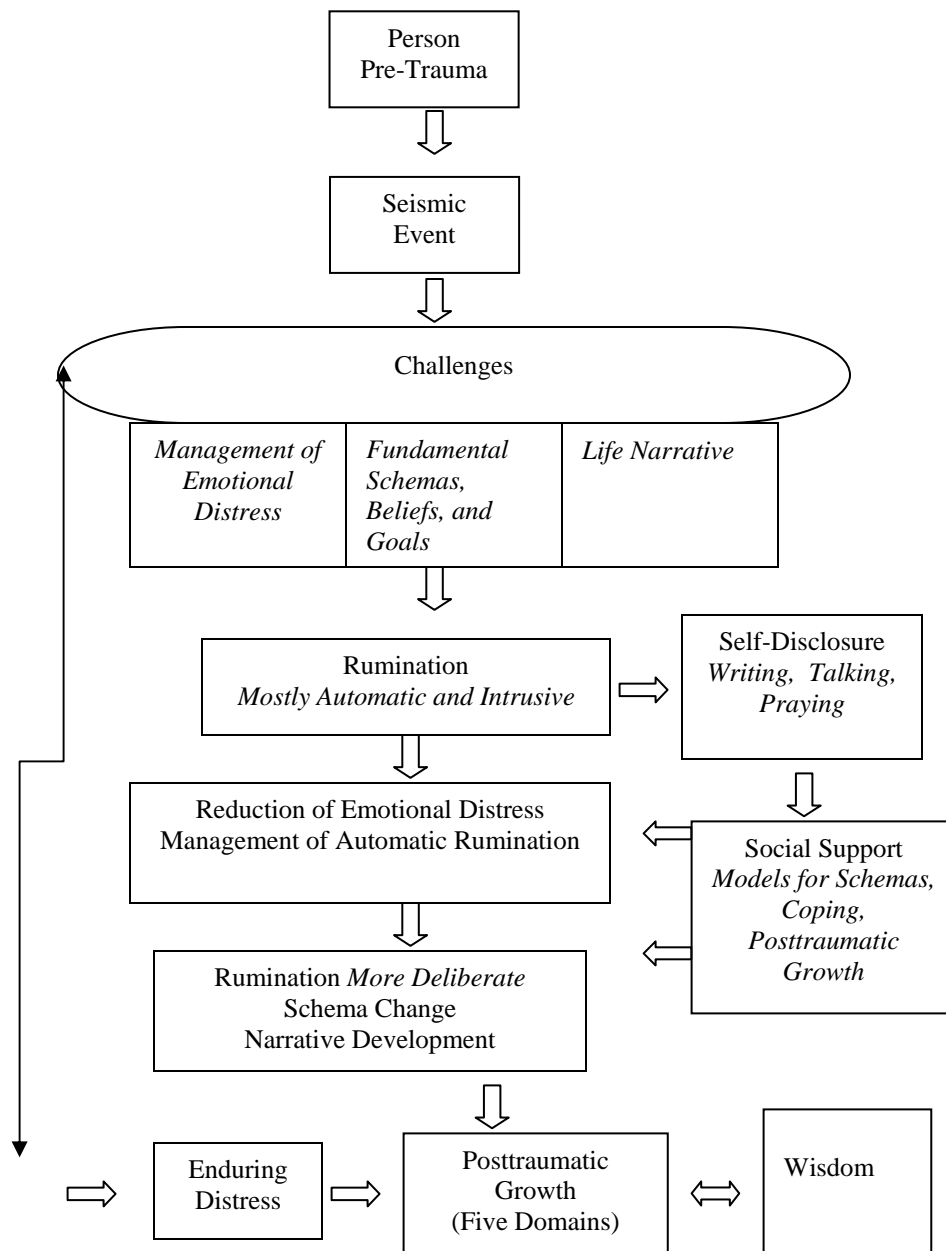


Figure Caption

Figure 1. Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) model of posttraumatic growth

The occurrence of a traumatic event or series of traumatic events to a growth-prone individual, according to Calhoun & Tedeschi (1998), is like an earthquake: the trauma is often of “seismic” proportions, and it serves to shake an individual’s foundation of belief and assumption in a disruptive and chaotic fashion. When a trauma like this occurs, it often initially causes high levels of emotional distress, rumination, and attempts to engage in soothing behaviors that are likely to bring immediate relief from discomfort. The experience of pain, suffering, and existential questioning serve as the soil for eventual growth, which can only occur when the individual experiences some initial success in her ability to cope with her new circumstances. Through this process, the traumatized individual questions and re-evaluates previously held assumptions about herself, others, and the world, and eventually rebuilds or modifies those assumptions in order to effectively adapt into her new circumstances. The process of rebuilding cognitions necessarily includes a strong affective component still linked to the trauma, which can eventually be reconstructed as motivation and positive emotion. However, the outcome of posttraumatic growth is not always consciously sought, but rather is a consequence of long-standing and distressing attempts to survive the psychological crisis.

Rumination and Distress. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995, 2004), the cognitive processes that are involved in coping with negative aspects of a crisis are the same processes involved in construing positive aspects of the same event. Specifically, individuals who have suffered from trauma seem to undergo a process of rumination that leads to eventual growth and change. Martin and Tesser (1996) defined rumination as a class of conscious thoughts that revolve around a common theme and that persist in the absence of immediate environmental demands requiring one to have those thoughts.

These authors theorized that the function of rumination is to decrease a perceived discrepancy between opposing thoughts or goals, between fantasy and reality, or between past and future behavior. Martin and Tesser noted that rumination is often unintentional and difficult to extinguish because it is easily activated by internal cognitive cues that remind individuals about their incomplete goals. Excessive rumination can subsequently interfere with one's ability to solve problems, maintain attitudes, and form impressions.

Other research on rumination has highlighted it as a negative cognitive occurrence that makes individuals vulnerable to negative affect and depression (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991). Martin and Tesser explained that depression often results when individuals ruminate about an unmet goal and perceive a discrepancy between their desired goals and their current behavior. Depressive responses can be prolonged when an individual ruminates because the effects of the negative mood enhance both negative cognitions and dysfunctional behaviors, which continue to reciprocally influence each other (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991).

Rumination can also make individuals susceptible to anxiety disorders and PTSD. Indeed, survivors of trauma often experience intrusive and unwanted thoughts related to traumatic event(s), and they can display difficulty modulating such responses in an adaptive fashion (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Ehlers and Clark (2000) found that PTSD symptoms become chronic or persistent when individuals excessively appraise the trauma they have undergone, and/or its sequelae, in negative ways. They explained that trauma causes a disturbance in autobiographical memory. This disturbance leads an individual's brain to be perceptually primed for trauma-related thoughts, feelings, or related environmental stimuli, which then continually trigger associative

memories of the trauma and lead individuals to be continually cognitively and emotionally hyper-aroused. Individuals who do not view these symptoms as normal responses to recovery often experience negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, or anger, all of which are often associated with the use of dysfunctional and/or avoidant coping strategies, such as dissociation or social withdrawal.

Most individuals who experience posttraumatic growth initially experience symptoms of PTSD and depression as they attempt to cope with and integrate aspects of the trauma into their existing schemas (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998). It has also been found that individuals who ruminate about how they could have avoided being the victim of trauma or who feel regret about their actions during the trauma experience more distress than those who maintain more of a present or future temporal orientation when thinking back on their trauma (Greenberg, 1995).

However, rumination, in addition to sometimes causing distress, can also serve as a process that helps individuals derive meaning from difficult circumstances (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 1998; Collins, Taylor, & Skokan, 1990; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991). In this sense, rumination serves not only a coping mechanism that is accessed in an attempt to manage distress, but as a motivational process that can breed self-reflection and change. Martin and Tesser (1996) noted that ruminative thoughts, although often unintentional, are not necessarily unwanted. These authors explained that rumination can instigate goal-oriented growth by leading individuals to undertake extensive problem-solving efforts and counterfactual imaginings. Martin and Tesser theorized that individuals ruminate until they have attained a particular goal or until they decide to abandon that goal, at which time they experience a decrease in repetitive

thoughts about that goal. Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998) noted that rumination and associated distress will eventually decrease when individuals disengage from untenable beliefs and unreachable goals.

Finally, studies on rumination have revealed that it may be an adaptive response to loss or traumatic events. Researchers in the field of evolutionary psychology have postulated that post-trauma rumination serves an adaptive function in the sense that continual reminders of threatening events can help individuals process past mistakes so that they can choose more adaptively in the future (King & Pennebaker, 1996). Silove (1998, p. 181) theorized that the intrusive thoughts characteristic of PTSD may comprise an “overlearned survival response” in particular individuals. Despite the fact that modern human cognitive functioning is largely under cortical control, he explained, it is possible that under traumatic conditions, the brain may revert to more primitive, survival-oriented responses honed over thousands of years. Silove theorized that intrusive thoughts might be a method through which the limbic system sends (false or overlearned) messages about novel or pending environmental threats in individuals who have previously experienced intense trauma. This researcher postulated that at one time in evolutionary history, such messages were likely necessary for the survival of humans, and have since become innate fear responses activated only in the aftermath of severe trauma.

Rumination and posttraumatic growth. Several factors may influence whether rumination following a trauma leads to a long-term experience of distress, or an outcome indicative of growth. The length of time that a trauma victim ruminates likely impacts such outcomes. Victims initially appear to experience intrusive thoughts about their trauma, which can be quite distressing (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Calhoun et al.

(2000) studied 54 young adults who had undergone a traumatic event within the past three years, such as the death of a loved one or being a victim of a crime, an accident, or a disaster. They found that posttraumatic growth was most likely to occur in individuals who ruminated about their experiences soon after the traumatic event, but not in individuals who were still ruminating about their experiences at the time of the study. It appears that emotional distress may impair the development of posttraumatic growth in the short-term, while likely serving as a catalyst for long-term growth and change, as distress often instigates novel coping efforts, the presence of increased social resources, and resilience (Schaefer & Moos, 1998).

In addition, the manner in which an individual ruminates may impact whether they experience subsequent posttraumatic growth. Tennen and Affleck (1998) note that individuals who report benefit-finding following a trauma describe both intentional efforts to change as well as automatic processes of change, both of which appear to be generated by rumination. Individuals who deliberately ruminate about the traumatic event often do not experience unwanted intrusive thoughts about the trauma after a certain period of time has passed, particularly if they are able to process their trauma through written or verbal expression (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

One study that illustrates this principle was conducted by Ullrich and Lutgendorf (2002), who found that college students instructed to journal as a way of deliberately coping with their trauma reported more posttraumatic growth than students who were not instructed to journal. These authors theorized that individuals who are willing to actively process their trauma tend to view crisis as an opportunity to grow, and that their conscious efforts to cope with the trauma may thus lead to cognitive, emotional, and

behavioral change. Pennebaker (2000) noted that writing likely assists in the cognitive processing of trauma works because not talking is a form of inhibition, which makes one's autonomic and central nervous system stressor work harder to reduce the risk of subsequent stress. Because positive cognitive changes have been associated with the disclosure of information through writing, health may result from translating one's experiences into language, according to Pennebaker.

It should also be noted that the experience of posttraumatic growth may differ for individuals who experience trait-level rumination, or a global tendency to be self-focused. Pryzgoda (2005) recently conducted a study that revealed negative relationships between trait rumination and most areas of constructive posttraumatic growth, including a present-oriented focus, controlled remembering, acceptance of the traumatic event, and the ability to engage in controlled remembering of the event. However, trait rumination *was* positively related to attempts to integrate and understand the trauma experience, as well as a general tendency to suppress unwanted thoughts about the traumatic event. These findings indicate that deliberate rumination may be more likely to incite growth in individuals who do *not* tend to experience trait rumination as a habitual response to life events.

Additionally, when individuals experience post-trauma rumination, the response from key figures in their social network may impact their subsequent degree of growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998). If survivors receive support from individuals who have undergone similar traumas, or experience validation for their actions during or after the trauma, they are more likely to express healthy coping behaviors and change their existing schemas to reflect the assimilation of meaning into the experience. Positive

social support networks often serve as precursors for growth by influencing coping behavior and encouraging successful adaptation to traumatic events. The presence of a stable and cohesive family, spouses and friends who are perceived as supportive, and a community network that encourage acceptance and communication, can facilitate better social and emotional adjustment following a trauma (Schaefer & Moos, 1998).

The Development of the Trauma Narrative. Through a prolonged process of reflection about unattained goals, schemas, or events after undergoing a traumatic event, trauma survivors eventually develop a trauma narrative that helps them to understand and derive meaning from their experiences (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This occurs over time as trauma survivors realize that their existing schemas will not help them to comprehend their experiences or to meet the goals they had prior to the trauma. They thus undergo a mostly unconscious process of schema reconstruction and goal evaluation that leads to changes in the way they define themselves, others, and the world. This process entails engagement with, rather than avoidance of, memories of the trauma(s), which is similar to exposure-based treatments for trauma (Foa & Rothbaum, 1998). In individuals who experience posttraumatic growth, prior goals are replaced with new goals or a worldview that is forward-moving, more realistic, and more optimistic. In time, survivors are able to distinguish between their pre-trauma identity and their post-trauma identity, often viewing the turning point of their trauma narrative as the trauma itself (McAdams, 2001).

Social support likely plays a strong role in the development of posttraumatic growth when it is consistent and stable across time (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The presence of supportive others can facilitate the process of schema reconstruction, as the

influence of different perspectives can help survivors integrate healthier interpretations of the trauma into their changing schemas (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996). It has also been found that individuals who ruminate and seek out concurrent social support are less prone to depression than those who exert social constraint in disclosing intrusive thoughts (Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999). The experience of rumination while sorting through one's distress with supportive others is what appears to facilitate the experience of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Outcomes of Posttraumatic Growth

In their review of the literature on growth following major life crises, Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998) found that individuals struggling with traumatic events often perceive growth after the trauma has occurred in the following three domains: 1) changes in self-perception; 2) changes in relationships to others; and 3) changes in life philosophy that include new priorities and increased appreciation for life. Changes in self-perception often include identifying as a survivor rather than a victim, subsequently perceiving oneself as strong rather than weak, and feeling more self-reliant, a greater sense of self-efficacy, and as if one can handle anything. Paradoxically, survivors often feel a sense of increased vulnerability because they are more aware of their own mortality, which can lead to changes in life priorities and a greater appreciation for life and relationships. Changes in relationships often include choosing to be closer to loved ones, increases in disclosure and emotional expressiveness, and inspiration to help others who have undergone similar difficulties. Common changes in life philosophy include greater appreciation for life and the "smaller things" in life, and a stronger sense of meaning or purpose.

According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), many individuals who experience posttraumatic growth feel that their experience has strengthened existing spiritual beliefs or increased their desire to be connected to a higher power. A study by Calhoun et al. (2000) revealed that, out of 54 young adults who had experienced one or more traumas over the past three years, those who were more open to religious change in the aftermath of trauma were more likely to experience concurrent posttraumatic growth. Another study which examined the role of spirituality in the lives of 151 domestic violence survivors found that the extent of religious involvement during and after the experience of abuse predicted improved psychological well-being and decreased levels of depression (Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006). In the latter study, 97% of the women surveyed reported that God or a higher power served as a source of comfort to them during times of distress.

Others who have experienced posttraumatic growth often feel they have gained wisdom about how to make better future life choices, which they are apt to want to share with others (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Part of the process of accruing wisdom following the experience of trauma entails accepting that life is full of paradoxes, in that individuals can be strong yet vulnerable, that one can be active while allowing processing to occur without a set timeframe, that one must accept help but recognize that she alone must struggle with integrating her trauma, and that although the trauma has occurred in the past, it will likely impact one's future (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998).

Unfortunately, posttraumatic growth does not always signal the end of distress for survivors of trauma. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), the available data suggest that the experience of posttraumatic growth is sometimes, but not always, correlated with reduced levels of psychological distress. These authors suggest that it is

thus not accurate to describe posttraumatic growth as synonymous with an increase in well-being or a decrease in distress. Rather, the struggle to grow is often difficult, painful, and full of reminders of the past as one integrates this new perspective on life. Thus, for some individuals, the process of growth may be fraught with pain and sorrow, but nonetheless considered a worthwhile journey.

The Present Study

Despite the recent research interest in resilience and posttraumatic growth in trauma survivors, only one known study has examined specific resiliency factors in women who have left violent relationships (e.g., Werner-Wilson et al., 2000). No researchers have specifically examined posttraumatic growth in survivors of interpersonal violence. The data for this project were collected as part of the Domestic Violence Project at The University of Montana, whose data are now in the form of an archival dataset. Although women in this population were not asked explicitly about resiliency or growth experiences, they chose voluntarily to answer advertisements so they could tell their stories and share their violent experiences with investigators. The presence of resilience and posttraumatic growth was thus expected in the majority of these women because of their active pursuit of the creation of a trauma narrative, or the revision of an existing trauma narrative, in the presence of a supportive interviewer. Since highly resilient individuals often proactively seek social support, and less resilient individuals often display avoidance coping (Werner-Wilson et al., 2000), avoidant individuals would not likely have volunteered for this study, despite the small financial incentive, as they might expect the in-depth interview to trigger negative emotions or cognitions they were actively seeking to avoid. Resilient individuals, on the other hand, are expected to have

been more willing to “put their story out there” in hopes that it might help them and other women to heal.

The goal of the present study was to discern the particular ways in the women who volunteered for the Domestic Violence Project displayed resilience and posttraumatic growth upon leaving an abusive relationship, with specific attention to the cognitive and emotional processes they underwent in order to make the decision to leave and not to return to their abuser. As the process of posttraumatic growth occurs gradually over time and as distress and automatic ruminations decrease (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), only interviews of women who had been out of a violent relationship for at least a year and whose interviews were audiotaped and transcribed were considered for the present analysis.

Chapter II

Methods

Participants

Three hundred and ninety-eight women were interviewed for the Domestic Violence Project between 1994 and 2001 based on self-reports of past or current involvement in a violent relationship. Of these women, a subset of 135 participants who had been out of a violent relationship for at least a year and whose interviews were audiotaped and transcribed word-for-word was selected for this study. Eight out of 135 women did not report any positive changes during or after their violent relationship. They were thus eliminated from the final analysis.

The remaining 127 women in this sample ranged in age from 18 to 63, with a mean age of 33.2 (12.11). Eighty nine percent of women interviewed were Caucasian, 4.7% were Native American, 1.6% were Hispanic, and 4.7% considered themselves biracial. Nearly half of the women surveyed reported that they had no children at the time of their violent relationship. The number of children living with female survivors of IPV ranged from 0 to 8 ($M = 1.34$, $SD = 1.76$) per household. The women surveyed reported a variety of years of education and/or vocational training, ranging from eighth grade or less to a graduate-level education. The majority of participants (nearly 65%) had a high school diploma and some college education. Although the mean family income for women in this sample fell in the range of \$20,000-\$25,000 per household, annual shared income ranged from \$0 to over \$50,000 a year.

All participants in this study were female survivors of IPV who were in a violent relationship with a man. Although women in same-sex violent relationships contributed

to the original Domestic Violence Project dataset, none qualified for this study. The mean length of the violent relationship under study was 5.21 years (6.24), although women reported being in the relationship for as few as three months and as long as 35 years. The length of time participants had been out of their violent relationship also varied considerably. Just over 60% of women had been out of the relationship for over three years, 22% of women had been out of the relationship for one to two years, and 17% of women had been out of the relationship for two to three years.

Materials

Interview. A semi-structured qualitative interview created by researchers at The University of Montana was comprised of between 20-35 questions about the participant's experience of violence within the relationship, leave-taking behaviors, and the availability and use of social support and community resources. During the three phases of data collection, questions were added and subtracted from the interview based on individual researchers' interests. These additional items included questions about the nature of the violent relationship, the progression of violence within the relationship, stresses and risk factors for violence, the influences of guilt, shame, substance abuse, current feelings towards one's partner, current contact with one's partner, and the role of children in stay-leave decision-making (see Appendix A for the most commonly utilized version of the interview; for differing versions of the interview, see Kennedy, 1999, Paluso, 2003, & Taylor, 2003). The final question on all versions of the interview was open-ended and encouraged participants to report anything that they wanted to about their experience of intimate partner violence. The interview did not include explicit questions about resilience or posttraumatic growth.

Demographic Questionnaire. Participants were asked to report demographic characteristics on a questionnaire that included questions about age, race, education, occupation, and income. Other information collected included whether individuals had a history of violent relationships, how long the most recent and past violent relationships had lasted, whether they currently had contact with their most recent violent partner and if this was related to fear or distress, information about social support-seeking during the violent relationship, and information about whether their children were also direct victims of their most recent violent relationship. See Appendix for a copy of the Demographic Questionnaire.

Procedure for the Domestic Violence Project

Participants were recruited for the Domestic Violence Project from various communities and Indian reservations across Western Montana with flyers, advertisements, communication with a local battered women's shelter and other supportive organizations for battered women, and within The University of Montana through the introductory psychology pool. The advertisements and flyers read: "Relationship distress: Research volunteers needed. We are looking for women to participate in a study investigating relationship distress. We are interested in talking with women from the community who: are currently involved in a violent relationship and do not intend to leave, or are currently involved in a violent relationship and are thinking about leaving, or have left a violent relationship in the past year or more than one year ago." Participants were asked to participate on a voluntary basis and were assured strict confidentiality.

Participants who responded to advertisements, flyers, or community referrals called a telephone number to be interviewed based on specific inclusion criteria. During the phone interview, participants were asked several questions about the type and severity of the violence they endured. These responses were later confirmed by responses on the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979), which was modified for the Domestic Violence Project to include a question about sexual assault during the course of the abusive relationship. Participants were eligible for inclusion in the study if they reported one incident of *serious violence* (i.e., being beaten, threatened with a weapon, forced intercourse, or strangulation) or four or more incidents of *moderate violence* (i.e., grabbing, pushing, shoving, slapping, hitting with a fist or an object, biting, kicking, having something thrown at them) within a past or current relationship. They were asked to return on a date and time of their choosing, and were given a choice of several meeting places around to community in order to ensure confidentiality and comfort during the interview process. Women who participated from the community were given an incentive of \$10 for their time, while university students who participated were instead given research credits required for course completion.

Interviews were administered in a structured fashion by Dr. Christine Fiore, graduate students, and undergraduate research assistants trained in interviewing techniques and about issues pertinent to battered women. They were transcribed by hand by interviewers, and recorded on audiotape whenever participants consented to be taped, in order to preserve the integrity of responses. On average, interviews lasted from one to three hours, depending on participant expressiveness and experience. At the close of the interview, interviewers checked in with participants to ask how they were currently

feeling and to answer questions. Participants were then asked to fill out a series of questionnaires, none of which were analyzed for the present study. Participants were then debriefed and provided with a list of resources in their home communities that they could access if they were feeling distressed or wanted further assistance with problems related to their violent relationship. They were also provided with information about how to obtain the results of the study after it was completed.

Procedure for the Present Study

The procedure for the present study was to examine the experiences of women who had been out of a violent relationship for at least a year. Of those women, a smaller sub-sample of women whose interviews were audiotaped and transcribed word-for-word were utilized for the present analysis, so that these women's responses could be accurately represented. Women participants who were currently in a violent relationship when they were interviewed or who had more recently had left their violent relationship were excluded from the analysis, as it has been postulated that posttraumatic growth occurs in the aftermath of trauma, when one's fundamental worldview has shifted sufficiently to allow for cognitive, emotional, and spiritual change (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Qualitative interviews from the Domestic Violence Project were analyzed in order to determine the ways in which participants potentially displayed unique or shared responses indicative of resilience or posttraumatic growth. Interviews from the Domestic Violence Project were previously transcribed into Microsoft Word, and responses from the sample of women under study were viewed electronically and examined carefully for evidence of resilience or posttraumatic growth. As interviews did not specifically address questions of resiliency or growth, each participant's responses to all interview questions

were considered part of the analysis. Some interview questions seemed to be more likely than others to tap resiliency and growth responses, such as the following open-ended questions at the start and close of the interview: “Tell me about your violent relationship,” “What influence has this violent relationship had on you?”, and “How are you feeling presently?” Although differing versions of the interview were utilized across participants, it was expected that evidence of resilience and posttraumatic growth would be most commonly found in the core questions included in all interviews (e.g., questions about violence within the relationship, leave-taking behaviors, and the availability and use of community resources and social support). However, participant responses to all questions were analyzed, in the event that variable interview questions might yield additionally fruitful responses.

Coding Methods. Interview responses were coded according to the grounded theory method outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). According to Strauss and Corbin, a grounded theory method of analysis presupposes that the data drive related theory and analysis, as opposed to quantitative methods, where theory precedes and directs the research question, method of data collection, and statistical analysis. In other words, “one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge” (p. 23). Because resilience and posttraumatic growth were expected to manifest idiosyncratically in this sample of women, detailed operational definitions for resilience and posttraumatic growth were not utilized in the analysis. Rather, the principal investigator noted any positive themes that women connected to their experiences in a violent relationship. It was unclear whether these themes would resemble findings from previous research on resilience, which include a return to pre-trauma levels of

functioning, successful coping efforts with distress associated with the violence and subsequent life demands, active social support seeking while they were still in the relationship, a sense of humor or perspective about the violence, and the tendency to try to construct meaning from the experience (Anthony, 1974; Ryff et al., 1998; Werner-Wilson et al., 2000). It was additionally uncertain whether women who displayed evidence of posttraumatic growth would or would not display the ability to imagine new possibilities for their lives or a greater appreciation for the smaller things in life, to make positive changes in their relationships or spiritual life, and an increased sense of personal strength, as has been found in previous research (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 1996, 2003, 2004). Themes of resilience and posttraumatic growth in this group of women were subsequently described, analyzed, and compared to previous research findings in hopes of building theory about the specific ways in which battered women are able to grow during or in the aftermath of a violent relationship.

Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory method consists of a tripartite coding system. In the first phase of analysis, open coding is conducted. Open coding consists of examining the data and breaking it down into discrete categories that emerge as coherent and meaningful entities. During this phase, researchers often name categories on the basis of the category's main tenets or central theme. During the open coding phase, documents can be analyzed line by line, paragraph by paragraph, or by the entire document.

In the open coding phase of this study, interview responses were examined for any references to growth or positive change that a woman related to her experience of staying in, leaving, or being out of a violent relationship. Interviews were coded for

positive evidence of resilience or growth or negative evidence of resilience or growth. Interviews with no evidence of growth or positive change were not included in the analysis. Once interviews with positive evidence of resilience or growth were identified, a research assistant reviewed these responses to ensure agreement on content and category. Disagreements among researchers were discussed extensively. A third trained researcher and faculty advisor was contacted for consultation and to facilitate resolution in a few cases where the presence of positive change was ambiguous.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), the second phase of analysis in a grounded theory approach consists of axial coding. Axial coding entails making connections between categories and subcategories once they have been created. The focus in this phase of analysis is specifying a category by describing the context in which it exists, the conditions that led to its creation or maintenance, the strategies through which it persists, and the consequences of those strategies. Although open and axial coding occur in two separate phases, they can proceed simultaneously as researchers attempt to organize and analyze the data. In the axial coding phase of this study, categories and subcategories of resilience and growth were further described based on the richness of participant responses.

Finally, the final phase of grounded theory analysis consists of selective coding, in which a core category is identified and tied to the other categories and subcategories in the form of a meaningful storyline (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This phase also consists of filling in undeveloped or unrefined categories to further explicate their meaning. In the selective coding phase of this study, a storyline was created to explain the complexities in resiliency and growth responses for each group of women.

Chapter III

Results

In the first phase of grounded theory analysis, open coding was conducted. The data were broken down into discrete categories that emerged based on the data rather than preconceived notions of particular types of resilience or growth. Four overarching categories of resilience and growth emerged: 1) Resilience during the process of stay-leave decision-making, 2) Resilience in the aftermath of a violent relationship, 3) Growth that occurred during the process of stay-leave decision-making, and 4) Posttraumatic growth.

Resilience during the process of stay-leave decision-making emerged mostly in the form of women making the difficult decision to leave a violent partner following a reconnection with parts of themselves they had inhibited while in the relationship. Three sub-themes emerged in this category. They included resilience in the form of returns to baseline levels of confidence, renewed faith in personal strength, and identity renewal.

Resilience in the aftermath of a violent relationship appeared in more varied forms. Participants displayed resilience in the way they viewed themselves, which occurred in the form of renewal of self-esteem, power, or identity. In addition, women reported resilience in romantic relationships that they pursued after their violent relationship ended. These participants struggled valiantly not to be cynical about future relationships and did not want their past experience in a violent relationship to constrain their natural tendencies to trust and love new partners. A third sub-theme that emerged was resilience in spirituality and faith. These participants noted that they had come to embrace their spirituality and faith after abandoning it while in an abusive relationship.

Women also reported a wide variety of experiences that were coded as growth while they were in the process of stay-leave decision-making. This category appeared to be separate from resilience that occurred during the violent relationship because participants in this category did not note that these positive changes constituted a qualitative return to baseline functioning, as is common in definitions of resilience (e.g., Werner-Wilson et al., 2000). Growth during the process took the form of positive changes in relation to others, self-perception, perception of the violent relationship, intolerance of abuse in the violent relationship, and improved coping skills. Several sub-themes emerged in the first three categories. Changes in relations to others took the form of seeking social support despite difficult circumstances, accepting support from supportive individuals despite resistance to being identified as a battered woman, positive experiences outside of the romantic relationship that helped women to reframe perceptions of the violent relationship, and perceptions of family members as additional victims of the violent relationship. Changes in self-perception most often entailed participant realizations that the abuse was not their fault, and that they deserved to be treated better. Changes in cognitive appraisal of the violent relationship included an awareness that the relationship was, indeed, abusive, or changes in the perception of a violent partner, particularly in terms of realizing that his behavior was not likely to change.

Finally, six different themes of posttraumatic growth emerged. These themes took the form of changes in relationships, self-perception, cognitive appraisal of the violent relationship, life goals, coping or behavior, and spirituality or religious beliefs. Several sub-themes emerged in the first three categories. Changes in relationships included

changes in reactions to ex-partners in situations when they had to maintain contact, the emergence of new, healthier behaviors with subsequent romantic partners, changes in views of family members and friends, and desires to help other battered women. Changes in self-perception included improved self-esteem, enhanced feelings of strength and independence, greater self-acceptance, and changes in identity. Finally, changes in cognitive appraisal of the violent relationship included increased awareness of the abusive dynamics that had occurred within the relationship, the attribution of meaning to the violent relationship, and acceptance and integration of the trauma experience. Figure 2 (inset) compares and contrasts the themes and sub-themes that emerged for growth that occurred during the violent relationship and posttraumatic growth.

During the axial and selective coding phases, connections were made between categories and subcategories and a coherent storyline emerged as a way of summarizing women's experiences. These summaries are contained in a short section at the end of each of the four overarching categories.

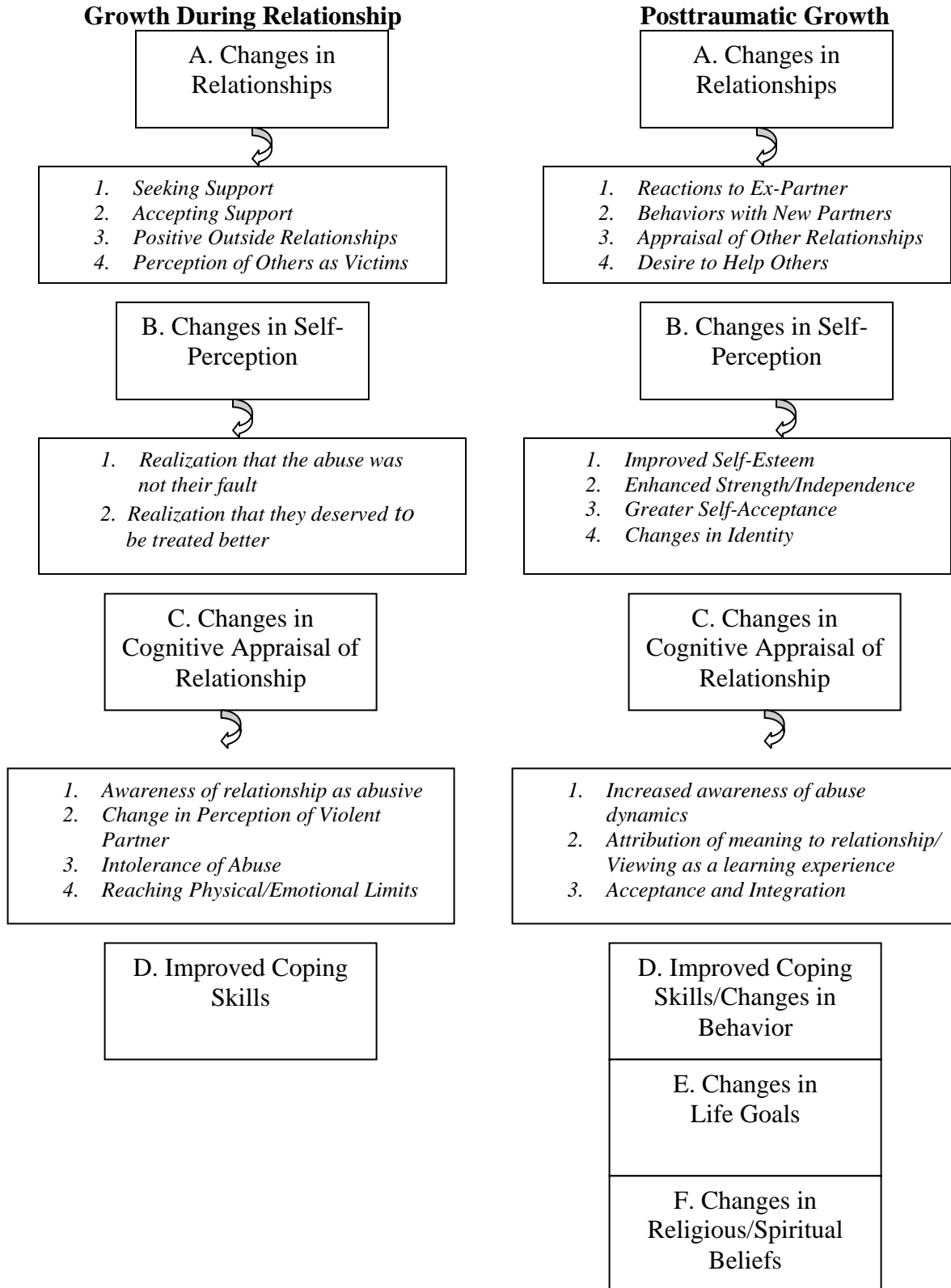


Figure Caption
Figure 2. Comparison of Growth During Relationship and Posttraumatic Growth

Resilience

Nearly 27% of women ($n = 34$) described examples of resilience that occurred either in the process of deciding to leave their violent partner or more gradually, in the more distant aftermath of their violent relationship. These responses were characterized as resilient by virtue of the successful coping efforts participants made under extremely difficult circumstances. In this study, resilience manifested as reports of return to baseline or “normal functioning” despite negative and harsh life experiences, as has been described by Paton et al. (2003) and Werner-Wilson et al. (2000). As interviewers did not ask specifically about returns to baseline functioning or particular coping efforts during and after the relationship, it is possible that interview responses underestimated participating women’s experiences of resiliency during the process of stay-leave decision-making and in the aftermath of violent relationships.

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of women in this sample whose quotations were selected to represent the experience of resilience during and after their violent relationship. Pseudonyms were utilized throughout this section and in similar tables that follow as a way of simultaneously describing the specific experiences of participants while maintaining their confidentiality. Demographic information is reflective of information about participants at the time of their interviews.

Resilience in Decision to Leave Partner

Resilience during the process of stay-leave decision-making occurred in three domains: 1) returns to baseline levels of confidence, 2) renewed faith in personal strength, and 3) motivation to renew aspects of their identities that participants felt they had lost temporarily as a result of stressful conditions within their violent relationship.

Return to baseline levels of confidence. Two percent of women ($n = 3$) described sporadic returns to a baseline level of confidence while they were still in a violent relationship. However, for Anna, age 21, the intermittent presence of a positive self-concept did not serve as a catalyst for her to end her three-year relationship. Rather, the sporadic return of her self-confidence appeared to help her cope with associated relational stress. Anna described periods of renewed confidence whenever she left her abuser to go out of town, stay out for the night, or engage in activities outside the relationship: “When I went away, I would come home with confidence.” However, this renewed sense of confidence quickly dissipated when this trait elicited more violence from her partner. Due to her subsequently waning self-confidence and a lack of independent resources, she stayed with him for nearly three years. It was only when her partner moved out of state that she sought counseling, which helped her to understand the abusive dynamics of their relationship, and which “gave me strength to work on my own life.” Since leaving her partner, Anna reported feeling better about herself and her choices, but that it had been a difficult struggle to retain her positive self-concept.

Unlike Anna, Claudia, a 26 year-old woman who left a violent relationship after three and a half years, found that in order to recover positive views of herself that had waned during her relationship, she had to make the final decision to leave her violent partner. She explained that being able to hear her rationalizations for leaving out loud in the presence of her counselor over the course of several therapy sessions was enough to jumpstart her confidence again: “Just talking about it, you know, like helped me confirm with myself that I was right, and you know, um, and gave me like, my self-esteem back.”

Similarly, for Kari, age 25, a supportive group of peers was critical in “help[ing]

me gain the confidence in leaving. With their support, it helped bring my self-esteem back up to a workable level where I could rely on that to influence the decisions I had made regarding the relationship.” Kari described a process of seeking out these friends despite feelings of shame for being in an abusive relationship.

Renewed faith in personal strength. For two percent of women ($n = 2$), resilience occurred in the area of renewed faith in their strength to cope with, and to end, their violent relationship. Jennifer, a 26 year-old woman who had dated her abuser for two and a half years, reported that a destructive act by her partner against an object she adored forced her to recognize that she had lost sight of her own strength, a trait which she felt had always defined her. She explained,

He smashed my guitar. [I’d] bought it with my own money, [it] meant a lot to me. I finally came to the realization that this is it. I finally gained the strength to leave....He had me so submissive, [which was] unlike me.

Jennifer noted that she had stayed in the relationship as long as she did because she was financially dependent on her abuser, and because he had made her feel so worthless and confused that she had temporarily lost faith in herself. She described the realization of how weak she had become as the catalyst that enabled her to finally leave. She stated that she didn’t return to him because she immediately found a job around other people her age, who helped her to realize that she deserved to be treated better.

Gina, a 40 year-old woman who had been in an abusive relationship for ten years, also became gradually aware of the fact that she’d lost sight of her own power when the abuse was finally acknowledged by the authorities. After an incident during which her partner kicked her child, Gina called the police and got a restraining order against him.

The protection afforded her by the police, coupled with her faith in God, helped her to finally leave the man whom she tried to leave “100 times” before. After he subsequently stalked her, Gina moved her children to a local battered women’s shelter. She credited the shelter staff with helping her to continue the process of regaining her strength. She explained, “After I started getting my strength and power back, I started saying, ‘I’m sorry I met you.’”

Identity renewal. Six percent of women ($n = 7$) explained that the one of the key reasons they left their violent partner was because they had become someone they no longer recognized. The awareness of this incongruent self-concept was distressing enough to motivate women to retain a positive self-concept at the expense of ending their violent relationship.

Emmy, age 20, had tried to leave her abusive boyfriend twice before. During those absences, she realized that she deserved to be treated better, but she went back to him because “he made me feel so bad and miserable about it”, as if the abuse *was* her fault. Both the influence of her supportive grandmother, and her perception of the discrepancy between the “weak” person she had become and the strong person she perceived herself to be, motivated her to leave her boyfriend:

I just knew I had to do it for myself. I was the one friends came to for advice. [To] not follow my own advice felt like a hypocrite. [I’d] seen abuse all my life; [I] knew I had to get out of it, or I’d end up somewhere I didn’t want to be.”

Yvette, age 21, explained that she decided to leave her partner partially because I was very ashamed that I would become the person I hated. I never – I swore I would never be like that. So I knew I had to get back there somehow, and leaving is the only

way...and it was all in my head and in my heart and like, making that huge transition.

I thought I loved him, you know, and it's hard to just turn off what you think is love.

Karen, age 42, concurred that she had become someone she didn't recognize, and that she was so unhappy with this transformation that she left her partner as a way of reclaiming her identity: "Well, unfortunately, I became mean myself, which is probably indirectly what finally gave me the strength to leave. Because I didn't want to be a mean person, so I wasn't comfortable in that role. So that little by little, it irritated me, and I had to get out of there."

Donna, who was in a violent marriage to an alcoholic man for twenty years, gradually became aware of the cumulative negative impact of her relationship when she could no longer reconcile continuing to be the person she had become in order to cope with the situation. She explained,

I just couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't take alcoholism. I didn't want to live like that. It wasn't a life I ever envisioned for myself, and I saw myself getting deeper and deeper into an ugly, ugly situation....my drinking habits started to escalate...I started realizing these things about myself...and basically I just didn't like it anymore.

Two women who had viewed themselves as independent before becoming involved with abusive men noted that a growing awareness of their dependence led them to re-assert their independence. Kayla, age 28, had been in a violent relationship for four years. At the time of her relationship, she was homeless. She explained that she had stayed with her violent boyfriend through that time because she didn't feel safe living a transient lifestyle alone. However, after years of providing her partner with emotional support, she gradually became aware that he hadn't been supportive of her. Ironically,

Kayla left her partner because “I needed to prove to myself that I could be alone....I just needed to prove that I could take care of myself and be responsible for my own actions and my own life.”

Joan, age 46, had allowed her violent husband to live in the house she had bought and sustained for years on her own income. She often chose to leave her home for days at a time to avoid being abused, until she realized that she was giving up her sense of independence. Joan stated, “I just got to the point where I said, ‘No, I’m not going to give him my house; I’m not just going to give up on my life.’”

Resilience in the Aftermath of the Relationship

Twenty-four women (19%) reported responses that occurred in the aftermath of their violent relationship which the principal investigator characterized as resilient. Resilient responses were noted in 1) women’s views of themselves, 2) women’s reports of subsequent relationships, and 3) in terms of renewed faith, spirituality, or religious beliefs. The majority of women described engagement in only one form of resilience. However, four women expressed resilience in more than one identified realm (for example, resilient responses to subsequent relationships in addition to a renewed sense of spirituality). As such, percentages reflecting participant responses in each subcategory count women who displayed multiple forms of resilience each time they fall within a subcategory.

Resiliency in self-concept. Ten percent of women ($n = 13$) explained that reparation of their self-concept was instrumental to a return to “normal” functioning in the aftermath of their violent relationship. For several participants, this included revitalizing notions of self that had been damaged by virtue of being in an abusive

relationship. Many women surveyed explained that this process had begun when they gradually lost a positive sense of self as a result of internalized negative messages from their abuser, and that it was eventually remedied by having to “slowly build up” their self-esteem over a “block of time.” In this sample of women, renewed self-concept in resilient women took the form of the renewal of previous perceptions of either: 1) self-esteem, 2) power and control, and 3) identity.

Renewed self-esteem. The majority of women who reported renewed self-esteem in the aftermath of a violent relationship ($n = 8$; 6%) noted that, prior to that relationship, they had mostly viewed themselves in a positive light. However, many women described that transient negative self-concepts had arisen in response to being the victim of emotional and physical abuse. For most of these women, this return of confidence occurred in an environment rife with positive social support, but was nonetheless a process that took patience, extensive cognitive and emotional processing, and time.

Agnes, a 53 year-old woman who had been in a violent relationship for nearly three years, noted that allowing herself to accept love and support from a new romantic partner served as a catalyst that helped her to reclaim her faith in herself. She explained,

I started getting my self-pride back...and I guess maybe I took that to heart and it those feelings – it was kind of overwhelming to have something – feeling back that you were worth something to somebody. And I guess that, um, I just kind of grabbed those feelings and ran with them. It was a good feeling, you know, I used to have a lot of pride in myself and the way I conducted myself, and worked...But you lose a certain level of self-pride or worth when you are belittled all the time.

Michelle, a 19 year-old woman who was involved in a violent relationship of less than a year, explained that the support of her friends during the relationship made her aware that she had allowed herself to relinquish her strength and independence. She reported that her friends “helped restore my confidence in myself” and helped her to know that I’m ok, to know that I’m not a bad person because this happened, because of that relationship. And that I’m worth something and that I totally deserve a guy to treat me well, and not to expect anything less than that.

Michelle noted that internalizing these messages from her friends helped her to remember that she was, indeed, worthy of a healthy relationship.

Laura, a 41 year-old woman who experienced violence in her relationship for nearly six years, concurred that the support of friends, family, and co-workers helped her to begin to gradually feel better about herself and to subsequently decide to leave. Although “it took me a long time to get where I really did believe in myself,” Laura explained that her friends helped to jump-start the internal process of retrieving her confidence.

Renewed power. Three women ($n = 3$, 2%) reported a renewed sense of power in the aftermath of a violent relationship. Georgia, a 35 year-old woman who’d been involved in a 12 year violent relationship, noted that “for years I had absolutely no self-esteem” because her abuser had convinced her that “I was not a good woman – I was a slut.” In order to cope, she drank alcohol and used drugs, which eventually landed her away from her abuser and in a chemical dependency treatment program. Georgia described “getting (her) power back” by talking about her relationship problems with

counselors in this setting, where she also took classes that educated her about domestic abuse. She explained:

Just having that separation period to get to know me, how to live normally, how to deal with my feelings and emotions, getting my power back, learning a little bit about spirituality, learning about the cycles of abuse (helped create positive change).

Callie, a 21 year-old woman, explained that she realized eventually that she could function autonomously without her abuser after seeking help from a counselor and by virtue of the continuous support of her family. Callie explained that her counselor encouraged her to think more about the violent relationship rather than just make excuses for her partner, while her family members were there when she needed support and to remind her of her strengths, despite the fact that they strongly disagreed with her choice of partner. These supports helped her to eventually realize that

I had lost a lot of my independent thinking. I couldn't really make decisions for myself because he would constantly just shoot them down, so I listened to him and I did a lot of the things he said. The turning point would probably be the last time [he hit her]...I realized I didn't need him; I was better off without him. Kind of got my personal power back, if you will.

Identity renewal. Ten percent of women ($n = 13$) described a gradual process of rebuilding their self-concept in the form of getting back in touch with self-perceptions of who they were prior to their violent relationship. Georgia explained that the emotional abuse she suffered was gradual. As this abuse intensified, her self-esteem began to decrease and she began to isolate herself from others because she was ashamed to admit she was in an abusive relationship. Georgia reported that after she left her violent partner,

friends, family, and various therapists helped her to stop feeling shameful and to start feeling good about herself over time. By virtue of the social support provided by these individuals, she reported a process of internal change, whereby she began to feel more connected to “lost” parts of herself. In reflecting back upon her marriage, she noted that in the three years since she left, “I’ve become the person I was before I met him again, and then some.”

Isabella, a 22 year-old woman who’d left a two-year violent relationship, explained that she had felt her identity slowly deteriorating while under the spell of her abuser. She experienced a great deal of related shame because she felt she had allowed this identity loss to occur. Isabella explained that she “did a lot of rebuilding of myself” once she got out of the relationship in order to prove to herself that she could stay away from her abuser and out of subsequent violent relationships.

Cami, a 24 year-old woman who’d been in a five-year violent relationship, described this loss of identity in a similar way: “You know, basically, when I was with him, I lost my identity and lived through him...I just didn’t have a person, you know, I wasn’t myself.” She noted that it has taken a lot of hard work since she left her abuser to reclaim her identity, but that “as much struggle as it is, it’s a good thing” because she is happy with where she currently stands in life.

Donna, a 47 year-old woman who escaped a 20 year-long violent marriage to an alcoholic, stated that she feels she has been her own best cheerleader in the aftermath of this relationship. She explained that it has been difficult for her to re-learn the many facets of her identity as an independent person, and that at times, she continues to

struggle with trusting her instincts in dating situations. However, Donna noted that the most helpful part about experiencing her violent marriage was

Just knowing that I can still be the person that I always knew and loved. I'm not so downtrodden anymore. I'm not so beat-up on anymore...I mean, I can just be me.

Before I always had to be this other person – I couldn't disappoint him.

Two women explained that their identity renewal has encompassed inspiration to pursue tasks they previously enjoyed or goals they had abandoned during their violent relationship since leaving their abuser. For Anna, this took the form of a return to very ordinary endeavors. She explained that during her violent relationship, she was afraid to walk to the store, even though it was only two blocks away. In reflecting upon the difference between her past and present situation, she associated a major decrease in fear and self-hatred with her increased willingness to actively engage in ordinary activities rather than to avoid these experiences. Similarly, Emily, a 53 year-old woman who had been in a violent relationship for two years, began to throw pottery after leaving her abuser, a coping skill that had helped her through difficult times in childhood.

Resiliency in subsequent relationships. Six women (5%) reported that since their violent relationship ended, they have fought hard to regain their ability to trust men and to seek subsequent romantic relationships despite significant related issues with trust and boundaries. For two women, this healing process involved reconnecting with their emotions and affirmative portions of their identity.

Rebecca, a 36 year-old woman who had been involved in an eight-month violent dating relationship, acknowledged that positive self-talk and anger motivated her to overcome her fear of seeking subsequent romantic relationships. Despite the lingering

presence of troubling posttraumatic stress symptoms and a strong attachment to her abuser, she decided upon their break-up that she would not allow herself to internalize her abuser's negative view of her. Rebecca explained, "I think it is a conscious choice...I consciously said, 'I am not going to be a victim.'" In imagined conversations with her abuser, she described how her anger towards him fueled her desire to find a way to trust again: "You're not going to take my ability to love and you're not going to take my ability to allow love to come back into my life, and you are not going to make a me a non-trusting person." Hannah, a 31 year-old woman who'd gotten involved with her abuser despite initial instincts not to date him, stated that now she always trusts her instincts regarding the character of the men she dates.

Other women reported that subsequent healing in romantic relationships has occurred as a result of positive social support. Staci, a 37 year-old woman who had been in a violent relationship for 5 years, noted that her counselor was instrumental in allowing her to trust men again by helping her to change the way she viewed relationships:

When I first went to counseling, the counselor was claiming that I had a broken heart – my ticker was busted and I had to fix it, so that I could try to trust again. It helped. It, it put it in perspective and made it visual and then I realized that I could change the views which I chose to find attractive.

Sicily, 30 years old at the time of her interview, noted that she now accepts love more freely from her current partner, a task which was initially difficult because she had not fully healed from a four-year long abusive relationship when they began dating. Although Sicily's violent relationship had ended over three years before she was interviewed, she reported that the guilt and self-doubt that plagued her during that

relationship was only now starting to decrease enough to allow her to gradually allow herself to be loved again.

Additionally, Michelle, a 19 year-old woman, noted that her friends “made me realize that there are good guys out there. Not everyone will be like him.” Once Michelle began to date again, she realized that her friends were right, and that not all men were abusive. The support provided by her friends appeared to catalyze cognitive changes within Michelle that allowed her to ultimately renew her faith in men.

Finally, Jacinda, age 41, described a resilient response to devastating changes in her family relationships, rather than in a subsequent romantic relationship. Jacinda had survived a 21-year abusive marriage and was inspired upon her divorce to reconnect with members of her family of origin from whom she’d been intentionally isolated for the entirety of her marriage. Prior to her marriage, she’d considered herself close with family members. Jacinda reported that the process of building mutual trust and respect has been hard for all parties involved, as her family members have long struggled with anger about her estrangement. Nonetheless, rebuilding trust and relationships remained a priority for her. She explained, “There’s been some hard work, but it’s been very rewarding.”

Resiliency in spirituality/faith. Upon reflection about their violent relationship, 4% of participants ($n = 5$) reported a renewal of spirituality or faith in themselves and/or others since their relationship ended. Three of these participants noted that they have since experienced a renewed sense of spirituality or connection to the spirit within. Sarah, a 55 year-old woman who was in a violent relationship for 22 years, noted, “I think it has allowed me to grow spiritually since I have left. I gave up my spirituality with him.” She

explained that this spiritual renewal has helped her to see all the ways in which she could grow personally, as well as help others in the future.

Pat, a 50 year-old woman who was in a two-year abusive relationship, echoed these sentiments, stating that she was thankful “my spirit didn’t die. I still have hope for people, even [her ex-partner]; maybe his life can be transformed. That’s up to him.”

Rebecca explained that her abusive partner had accumulated over \$10,000 in debt on her credit card. Although this situation created more stress in the relationship, she made sure that she didn’t allow it to impact the way she viewed herself. She told the interviewer that since she left her abuser, she has thought to herself: “You might be able to steal \$12,000 from me, you might be able to hit me – throw me around and all that, but you can’t take away my spirit.”

Two additional women described renewed involvement with Christian churches, a support they had both used to access prior to their abusive relationship. Staci hadn’t been allowed by her abuser to seek support at church, and welcomed the chance to return to this supportive community after she decided to end the relationship. Shannon, a 47 year-old woman who had been involved in an abusive relationship for nearly seven years, had stopped going to church during the relationship as a punishment to herself “because I knew I was wrong” to spend so much of her time with an abusive man who treated her poorly. She reported that she had recently begun praying again, in addition to seeking the support of her pastor, as a way of coping with life’s difficulties.

Summary of Resilient Experiences

Resilience in participants’ ultimate decisions to leave their violent partners appeared to have roots in noticing that they had lost a sense of their true identity or had

lost touch with the parts of themselves they considered powerful and confident. Intermittent glimpses of their strength, confidence, and “true identities” over the course of otherwise passive or compromised behavior within their violent relationship motivated these women to find ways to return to a level of functioning consistent with personal standards and self-perceptions.

Resilient women described their decisions to leave violent partners as related at least partially to a discrepant self-concept, i.e., the perception of oneself as weak or changed for the worse, or to distress associated with an awareness of the disappearance of feelings of strength and confidence in the presence of one’s abuser. These women described the renewal of strength and positive self-concept as a gradual process that waxed and waned during the relationship until each decided she was ready to leave her violent partner. In some cases, stay-leave decision-making was expedited as a result of supportive others, such as friends, family members, therapists, or police officers who helped these women to realize they should leave their violent partner, or who assisted participants with feeling as if their decisions to leave were justified. All women reported that they have since retained views of themselves as either strong or confident as a result of having the opportunity to rebuild their inner resources in the presence of individuals who have provided either informal or formal positive support.

Other women described resilient notions of self-concept in the *aftermath* of violent relationships, rather than during the process of stay-leave decision-making. These women described a similar process that entailed a gradual rebuilding of self based on feelings that they had lost themselves within the relationship. The specific type of change in self-concept varied by participant. Some women reported renewed self-esteem, others

a rehabilitated sense of power and control over their lives, and still others a return to previous notions of “who they were” before becoming a battered woman. In the lives of those women who reported working hard to rebuild their self-esteem and retain a sense of personal power, the presence of supportive others was viewed as critical to enhancing self-concept. Only one woman who reported changes in identity mentioned the role of supportive others in facilitating this change. The remainder of participants highlighted personal struggles for mastery and the great pride they have taken in their efforts to “find themselves” again as key to their renewed self-definitions.

Findings were similar for women who experienced resilience in relationships following the abusive relationship. For these participants, a return to “normal” functioning in subsequent romantic relationships occurred as a result of either individual factors, such as confidence in the ability to love and renewed faith in one’s instincts, or was nurtured to fruition by friends, counselors, or romantic partners who encouraged them to process and understand the difference between abusive and healthy relationships. The woman who has been working to renew her relationships with estranged family members noted that a return to “normal” interactions with them has comprised a long and difficult process on the basis of mutual distrust. Each participant described the process of regaining trust in significant others as time-consuming, non-linear, and extremely emotionally difficult. However, despite this emotional challenge, all of these women appeared to remain actively engaged with their negative emotions and to continue to seek social support until they were able to gradually trust others again. Finally, those women that described a renewal of faith or spirituality were defined by their refusal to allow their

past violent relationship to limit their hope for the future, their potential for subsequent growth, or their compassionate views towards others.

Growth Experiences during the Violent Relationship

The majority of participants described an array of positive changes that occurred in their lives both during the extended process of stay-leave decision-making and either in the immediate or distant aftermath of their violent relationships. The positive changes that occurred *after* women had left their violent partners were considered examples of posttraumatic growth, and will be presented in the next section.

Ninety-one women (71.6%) described at least one type of positive change that occurred while they were in the process of deciding to leave their violent partner. Of these 91 women, 41% reported one type of positive change, 17% reported two types of positive change, 9% reported three types of positive change, and just over 4% presented four types of positive change. Consistent with the literature on stay-leave decision-making (e.g., Fiore Lerner & Kennedy, 2000; Werner-Wilson et al., 2000), many women described leaving their abusive partner as a long, gradual process of letting go of who they thought their partner was, the idea that he would change, and the notion that they should stay with their abusive partner for the sake of their children. However, as was expected, in the midst of pondering their future, questioning their and their partner's actions, and experiencing great distress, many of these women described emotional and cognitive processes that appeared to contain seedlings of growth and change.

Table 2 contains pseudonyms for women whose quotations have been selected to illustrate positive life changes that occurred during the process of stay-leave decision-making. Positive life changes described during the process of stay-leave decision-making

occurred in five areas: 1) relations to others, 2) self-perception, 3) perception of the violent relationship, 4) intolerance of subsequent abusive behaviors, and 5) improved coping skills.

Changes in Relations to Others

Forty-seven percent of participants who reported significant positive changes while immersed in the process of deciding whether or not to leave their violent partner ($n = 60$) noted that a predominant change occurred during that time in the way they related to others. Four different types of positive changes were noted. These included 1) seeking social support despite difficult circumstances, 2) accepting support from family members, friends, therapists, and community members despite resistance to being identified as a battered woman, 3) positive social experiences outside of the romantic relationship that helped them reframe the violent relationship, and 4) emergent perceptions of family members (especially children) as victims of the violent relationship. These changes did not occur across all participants; rather, participants predominantly reported one or more idiosyncratic positive changes that appeared, to some degree, to individually influence their decisions to leave their violent partners.

Seeking social support despite difficult circumstances. Nine percent of women ($n = 11$) described a novel, emergent desire to receive assistance for psychological problems related to their abusive relationship while they were still in the relationship. For these women, the distress associated with the relationship had become so unbearable that they consciously sought treatment as a way of increasing their insight about their and their partners' motivations. Not surprisingly, most women described attending multiple

sessions, and sometimes years, of counseling to process the enormous emotional and cognitive impact of their abusive relationship.

Elizabeth, a 40 year-old woman, explained that she went to counseling for several years, in addition to “creating my own support system.” She finally decided leave her abuser after taking the time to process and integrate her experience by visualizing what she might do differently if she had the chance. This process helped her to recognize that she was strong enough to be able to avoid acting in a similar fashion in subsequent romantic relationships. Elizabeth explained,

I was so into why does this happen to me, what am I doing wrong, and then I went back through the steps to figure out choices that I made, and how I could change things along the path...[I spent time] visualizing what I would do in the same situation and trying to figure out a happier ending or not a happier ending, but just making the situation better.

Some women stated that they found counselors most helpful when these professionals didn't tell them what to do, but rather, educated them about the detriments of abusive relationships and waited for them to make the decision to leave independently. Norma, a 26 year-old woman who had been in a year-long abusive relationship, stated,

I just felt like the person was very understanding and very open and nonjudgmental and [it was] clear that he saw the light at the end of the tunnel way before I did, but he didn't tell me that, you know, he didn't tell me what the problem was. He let me come to that, and that's probably the sign of a good counselor.

Norma explained that a single question her therapist asked her elicited such intense self-examination that it eventually led her to leave her violent partner permanently:

It took a little while, and I thought about it, and I was like, this relationship does not make me happy. I don't feel good about myself. I don't feel good about this. I do feel like this person has a lot of anger and control issues that he is not willing to face, and I'm tired...I went to a friend's house and I thought and thought and thought and then I just came back and when I walked back in the door, it was like, there is no way I can do this anymore.

Other women noted that their therapists' direct, persuasive efforts to get them to leave their violent partners helped to convince them that this was the right decision. Sicily explained that when she thinks of her counselor, she feels "I owe it all to him because he really opened up my eyes to what the possibilities of my future would have been." Had Sicily not had the courage to pursue counseling during her violent relationship, she may never have become aware of the detriments associated with staying in such a relationship.

Joely, a 43 year-old woman whose most recent abusive relationship had spanned three and a half years, sought therapy 18 years later to address the pervasive impact of that relationship, subsequent abusive relationships, and her abusive childhood. Because she no longer trusted men, she purposely picked a male therapist as a way of challenging her growing belief that all men condone abusive relationships. She explained that she was able to heal her distrust towards men after her male therapist continually and explicitly

denounced the actions of her abuser, which validated self-perceptions of her identity as a survivor and helped her to seek, rather than to avoid, future relationships with men.

Three percent of women ($n = 4$) became involved in group therapy at some point during their violent relationship, noting its beneficial effects. Each of these women explained that the process of sharing their stories with other women was validating, and that hearing other women's stories helped to normalize their experiences. Staci described group therapy in the following way: "These women were just mirrors in front of me. I guess in a way I was in denial in my life up to that point. It helped me physically seeing someone else in the position I had been in different stages in my life."

Acceptance of social support despite resistance. Nine percent ($n = 12$) of women described a process of gradually accepting support from others despite intense feelings of shame or desires to avoid reaching out for fear it would mean acknowledging that they were, indeed, in an abusive relationship. Supportive others included family members, friends, and subsequent romantic partners. This acceptance provided the support many women needed to leave their violent partner permanently.

Emmy, a 20 year-old who'd been in a two-year abusive relationship while living with her parents during high school, noted that she hid the violence from them. She described a difficult process of eventually disclosing the abuse to her grandmother, a crime victim's advocate, despite her strong experience of shame. Her grandmother called her multiple times every day to "drill in [her] head" that it wasn't her fault, that she should leave her boyfriend, and that she deserved better. Emmy stated that the positive reassurance her grandmother provided helped her rebuild her self-esteem to the point where she finally realized that she did deserve better, and decided to leave her boyfriend.

Darlene, a 40 year-old woman who had ended an abusive marriage after 11 years, revealed a similar disclosure to her parents after years of hiding the abuse from them. She described the support of her father during this time as instrumental in helping her to cope with the abuse. She stated,

It felt like I was just on the edge of a nervous breakdown, and for days, it was all I could do to get through the next five minutes. And my father would call me on the phone and he would have me set the timer for five minutes, and then he would have me watch it, and then he would call me back in five more minutes. And he did this for days with me – just keeping me focused on something else....it got me through.

With the support of her father, Darlene eventually changed the way she viewed the relationship, and decided to leave her violent husband for good, despite intense feelings of fear.

Loretta, a high school senior at the time of her abusive relationship, explained that if her parents hadn't refused her abuser's phone calls the first time they broke up temporarily, she might still be together with him to this day. She noted that now, she is grateful for her parents' intervention, because it helped her to realize she deserved better in a romantic partner, and to choose such partners more wisely in the future.

Other women explained that friends were instrumental in helping them to realize that they needed to leave their violent partner. Alisa, age 19, explained that she realized she had to leave her abusive boyfriend when her friends expressed concern that she had isolated herself from them. This display of affection from her friends helped Alisa to realize that she had allowed her boyfriend to isolate her from those individuals she cared

about most, and that staying in her romantic relationship was not worth the loss of important friendships.

Yvette, age 21, described a visit from a friend who lived out of state as an event that impacted her to think more critically about her abusive relationship. Her friend's genuine concern for her safety and well-being made Yvette aware that her relationship was impacting her and other people that she cared about negatively. Yet she didn't leave her abuser until she had experienced some distance from him after procuring a restraining order. Although "it took a long time for my brain to transition that it was wrong," Yvette gradually realized that the relationship was not her fault, and moved on.

Finally, a few women met men during their violent relationship who became later romantic partners. These men reportedly helped this subset of participants to realize they deserved to be treated better within relationships. Agnes, a 53 year-old woman who was in an abusive relationship of two and a half years, explained this in the following fashion:

I met...my husband now, and it was like a door opening up for me that, uh, there are people out there that don't treat you like inferior, lower-than-pond-scum critters, and it was kind of nice being treated like a human being, being treated like a lady. I guess I just kind of went off the deep end with him, and said, "I don't have to live like this."

Winona, age 24, noted that the discrepancy between how she was treated by others and how her partner treated her helped her to realize she deserved better:

I started to have relationships that felt good, and people listened to me. You know, I started finding relationships with people who saw me for who I was, make me feel like a strong person. I'd hang out with him and feel like shit, and it was this sort of awareness that I could feel better without him.

Positive social experiences outside of the romantic relationship. Nine percent of women ($n = 12$) described positive, self-affirming experiences that occurred when they spent time away from their abuser in the presence of supportive others. Not surprisingly, these experiences often influenced and/or expedited participants' decisions to leave their abusers.

Four women described leaving violent relationships during high school after significant periods of time away from their abusive partners. Heather, a 22 year-old who'd been in an abusive relationship for three years, went out of state on vacation with her friends. She explained, "That whole time I was thinking I was a horrible person, and I was ashamed of myself, but...we had fun, so I came back and saw how ridiculous it was and decided that I didn't need it anymore." Kari, age 22, noted after a three-week summer vacation with her parents that "I was really stupid to stay in a relationship like that. I knew I was better than that." Jane, a 24 year-old woman, stated, "I know that when I was gone [on a school trip], I felt good....I remember I could tell the difference in that." During that trip, she purposely cheated on her boyfriend as a means of driving him away. Although her boyfriend stalked her for awhile after her trip, Jane was able to put the relationship behind her because "I just couldn't keep dealing with it."

Anna, age 21, noticed that her mood lifted once she made friends in addition to her partner. Additionally, she sought help at a college counseling center, where she attended an abuse awareness program. Upon noticing the discrepancy between how happy she felt with friends and counselors and how unhappy she was with her abuser, she decided to leave the relationship. Holly, age 35, broke the isolation her husband had imposed upon her by "keeping me on welfare" to attend a class at community college.

This time away revealed to her that “his emotional abuse was full of it. It wasn’t the truth, because there were people that were liking me for who I was.” Although this experience enhanced Holly’s self-confidence and instigated new thoughts about the abusive dynamics of her relationship, Holly didn’t make the decision to leave until after she began working outside the home and consistently reaching out to friends for support.

Sarah, Georgia, and Darlene also found that leaving the home to return to work jump-started their confidence and influenced them to begin to view their relationships as unhealthy. Sarah explained that when she made the decision to leave her abuser, “The first words that came out of my mouth were, ‘I choose not to live this way anymore.’”

Emergent perception of family members/children as victims. Twenty percent of women ($n = 25$) explained that they were motivated to think about leaving their abuser after noting the negative impact their relationship was having on other individuals in their lives. One woman was motivated to consider leaving her violent partner after realizing that their relationship had shamed and embarrassed her mother. However, the remaining 24 women expressed an emergent realization that they didn’t want to raise their children in an abusive environment, citing this as an ultimate reason for leaving their violent partners.

Many women described specific incidents that served as turning points in their relationship, at which time they recognized the negative impact their relationship was having, or could potentially have, on their children. Amber, age 25, noted that the main reason she left was the birth of her daughter, which forced her out of denial. She noted, “To rationalize that [she should leave in order to protect her daughter] enabled me to rationalize how wrong it was, how hurt I had been, how much of a victim I had been, and

that the state of mind I was in allowed me to believe that was ok.” Alison, age 34, explained this turning point in the following fashion:

Looking at my daughter’s face, I had a sense of what I wanted for my own family, had a sense of what normal actually was, and...looking at her face and seeing she was already so afraid...[motivated her to make plans to leave her partner].

Betty, a 45 year-old woman, noted that her abusive husband began to control her children in the same fashion he was controlling her. She reported that the final straw in her relationship was:

when I realized that he was starving his own kids. It just totally dawned on me: “What kind of person would do this – is he – that he would do that to his own children?” I didn’t think much of myself...as long as it was between me and him. But when I realized what it was doing to the kids; that’s when I knew it had to stop.

Betty noted that the subsequent anger she felt played an enormous role in her decision to leave her husband permanently, because this extreme negative emotion signaled to her the extent of the damage that had been done to both her and her children.

Emily described an incident during which she locked herself in her daughter’s room to avoid getting beaten by her husband. He insisted that she open the door, which she did after she made him promise not to hit her. When she opened the door, he knocked her unconscious. She explained,

That was kind of a changing point for me, ‘cause I realized for the first time that my daughter’s life was in danger, because, um, if I was unconscious, he might hit her, and if he hit her, he would kill her...And that changed me into...planning an escape. Before that, I think I was brainwashed into thinking that’s how I deserved to be

treated...I think it was the mother instinct that, you know, that motivated me to leave all my worldly possessions [and him].

Sicily reported a similar moment:

I was holding her [daughter] and I turned around and looked at him. There must have been something in my whole being that changed because she opened up her eyes and she immediately started to cry. I remember right then and there saying to myself, "I'm not raising my daughter in this house. I'm not raising my daughter like this."

Other women described less sudden or dramatic realizations of how their relationship was impacting family members. Rather, these participants explained such realizations as more gradual and accumulative. Several women noted that they finally left their violent partners because they didn't want their children to learn to be abusers or victims, or to view them as victims. Pat noted, "I was concerned that my son would grow up to be a batterer and that my daughter would grow up to be battered." Christine explained that she made the decision to leave her violent husband so that her daughter would not have to witness violence, and so she wouldn't grow up to view her mother as "weak or disrespected."

Similarly, Staci stated, "I felt that staying in the relationship and losing my sense of self and my self-esteem was too negative of an effect on the children that I was raising." Sicily explained that she left her abuser for good because she didn't want to be a martyr whose story of victimization might get passed down for generations, and somehow venerate her suffering.

Jacinda, a survivor of 21 years of marital abuse, noted that she had felt sick for many years about how her violent marriage was impacting her children. However, she

had remained with her husband out of a strong religious belief against divorce. Her catalyst for leaving was that her husband bought Christmas gifts for all of his extended family members after intentionally omitting to buy a gift for his 18 year-old daughter. Although her children were both grown and living on their own at that time, Jacinda realized the extent of damage that had been done to them and resolved to stop the cycle of violence. She was further influenced by her son's admission that he didn't want to get married because he feared being abusive, and her daughter's fear that Jacinda shouldn't get to know her own grandchildren, lest she die prematurely at the hands of her husband.

Changes in Self-Perception

Nine percent of women ($n = 12$) described positive changes in self-perception that occurred during the process of stay-leave decision-making and influenced them at some level to leave their violent partners. For all but one of these women, changes in self-perception entailed realizing during the relationship that the abuse was not their fault and that they deserved to be treated better. The remaining participant explained that she left her violent partner following an emergent awareness that it would be more adaptive for her to focus on her personal needs before always meeting her partner's needs first.

Ninety-two percent of these women ($n = 11$) explained that they had initially written off their experience of abuse as due to their own actions. These participants noted that they felt they did something to deserve the abuse, or that they must have elicited abuse from their partner because there was something wrong with them. Once these women realized through a process of intense self-reflection that they were not to blame for the abuse and that they deserved to be treated better, all of them gradually found the strength to leave their violent partners. For some women, this strength emerged following

a great deal of rumination, which was, not surprisingly, accompanied by a great deal of distress. In some cases, distressful emotions influenced women to leave their partners, while in other cases, rumination about the relationship coupled with an emergent awareness that the abuse was not their fault led to women's decisions to leave. Women's beliefs that they deserved to be treated better by their partners were enhanced in participants who had supportive others to help them to validate their newly positive self-concept.

Brooke, age 20, decided to end her year-long violent relationship when her boyfriend hit her for the second time. She had mostly kept the violence secret from others because she felt ashamed. She decided independently to end the relationship "because I knew I was not where I wanted to be. I deserve a lot better."

On the other hand, Charlene, age 42, experienced a more gradual awareness that she deserved to be treated better by her abusive, cocaine-addicted husband. Charlene explained that she had witnessed domestic violence between her parents when she was a child, and that since this time "I'd kind of always asked to be hurt, to some degree." She married her abuser following a first marriage to a man who shot and killed himself in her presence. For fifteen years, Charlene tolerated this husband's abuse because, on some level, she believed she deserved it. She experienced a turning point in her marriage when her grandmother died and her husband nonetheless beat her and did not allow her to talk with other family members at the funeral. During a cocaine binge that followed the funeral, Charlene's husband accused her of putting everyone else before him. It was then that Charlene "realized I wasn't a bad person and he was crazy. It was not my fault...I needed to get out."

Winona explained that when she started to make friends outside of her relationship, “I realized that I felt better without him in my life. Um, I just started listening to myself. It *hurt*.” This pain, which had become unbearable, motivated her to leave her violent boyfriend of three years for good.

Diana, age 35, explained that the process of self-reflection she went through in order to leave her violent boyfriend of nearly two years was elicited in counseling. She stated, “I got counseling. I started to figure out, you know, that somehow, you know, this wasn’t my fault. That nobody deserves to be hit...nobody deserves to be treated like that; nobody. And...that includes me.”

Pat’s husband of two years had convinced her that she deserved his abuse. Pat, age 50, believed that the abuse was her fault until close to the end of their marriage, explaining that this self-blame likely came from a childhood pattern of self-deprecation learned through early rejections by her mother. However, in the presence of supportive members of her church, Pat began to engage in a process of self-reflection that culminated in the ultimate decision to leave her husband. She stated,

I became very active in the church, and it had, it talked a lot about how we are thinking and have missions and loving oneself and I found that I could start doing that. When I started loving myself more, I didn’t – wouldn’t – I was conflicted about hating myself, which is something he needed me to do.

Rachel, a 41 year-old woman who made the difficult decision to leave her violent husband after nearly ten years of marriage, concurred that “The [Mormon] church convinced me, made me realize, no matter what, I am a child of God and I don’t deserve to be treated that way.”

Kate, age 22, had become involved in three separate violent relationships before age 18. Her last and most harmful abusive relationship ended when her violent partner went to prison. Soon after he left, Kate was incarcerated for another crime. Kate began to cultivate a sense of spirituality in jail, which helped her to reflect on what went wrong within her relationship and how she had gotten involved in so many violent relationships. She reported,

I guess in the relationship I, for some odd reason – I didn't think I was worth anything. You know, I was like, "Maybe I deserve this; maybe I did something; maybe this is punishment." And then later as I got deeper into my spirituality mode, I was like, "No, no one deserves to be held prisoner; no one deserves to be isolated; no one deserves to, every day, you know, not be able to sleep, not be able to eat because you're in total fear...as I started studying the new-age religions and stuff, and different ideas come into your mind of well-being and self-worth....[I was] analyzing the situation and at the same time, trying to heal.

Finally, Alex, a 45 year-old woman who left her violent husband after 17 years, explained that she had stayed with her husband because of their children. Alex had deferred her own needs to those of her husband and children, thinking that if she tried to make everybody happy, the abuse would cease. When that didn't happen, Alex began to realize that this deference and dependence may have contributed to harming her and her children. She explained,

The reason I felt I was staying was that through the years I always felt I could help everyone out - I could do for everyone's emotions, and take care of them. And I realized that it was no logical reason to be staying for the reasons I had, and that it was

for my best interest [to leave].

Changes in Cognitive Appraisal of the Violent Relationship

Twenty-nine percent of women ($n = 37$) described gradual changes in the way they perceived their violent relationship while they were still with their partners. These emergent beliefs about the unhealthy dynamics of the abusive relationship helped to serve as a catalyst for women to re-examine their choice to remain with their partners, and contributed to an ultimate decision to leave them. Changes in the perception of women's violent relationships included either 1) a novel awareness that the relationship was abusive, or 2) changes in perception of their violent partner, particularly in terms of accepting that their partner's behavior was not likely to change.

Awareness of the relationship as abusive. Twelve percent of women ($n = 15$) described a gradual awareness while they were in the violent relationship that their romantic relationship was, indeed, abusive. Many of these women stated that, previous to this realization, they had either blamed themselves for the abuse or normalized it in some way as something that occurred in most relationships. For all of these women, the realization that they were in an abusive relationship was facilitated by supportive others, such as counselors, family members, or friends.

Several women explained that they became aware that they were in an abusive relationship when this was pointed out to them by a counselor. Andrea, a 40 year-old woman who had gotten involved with an abusive boyfriend during her last year of college, moved out of state after she obtained her degree in order to pursue a new job. Her boyfriend remained behind, and they began to have problems maintaining the relationship from a distance. At that time, Andrea sought counseling. She explained that

she finally decided to end the relationship after her counselor pointed out to her that she was in an abusive relationship, a fact which she had never truly believed. Andrea stated, “My counselor was a big part of the reason. She gave me pamphlets on battered women. When I looked at it, I saw that was me.” This realization helped Andrea to decide that she deserved to be treated better, which led her to sever ties with her violent partner.

Anna expressed a similar sentiment about counselors that helped her when she sought assistance at a sexual assault resource center. She noted that when they “gave me the reality that it was abuse and not in my head,” this support helped her to feel less guilty about being in a violent relationship and more empowered to work towards ending it. She decided to end the relationship after realizing that her partner was to blame for the violence, rather than her. The information provided by her counselors helped to inspire Anna to rethink her choice to remain with this violent partner, which ultimately influenced her to leave.

Both Yvette and Norma concurred that when their counselors showed them a pamphlet about the cycle of violence, their suspicions about the unhealthy nature of their relationships were validated, which helped inspire them to end their relationships. Wendy, age 25, explained that an emerging awareness that she was perpetuating the cycle of violence motivated her to change her ways. She noted, “For a long time, I didn’t look at it as a violent relationship.” This changed when her counselor helped her to realize the habitual relationships she had gotten into as a result of witnessing domestic violence between her own parents. The awareness that she was participating in the same type of relationship that had caused her so much pain inspired Wendy to break up with her violent partner for good. Similarly, Norma stayed with her abusive boyfriend because she

was in denial. However, once her counselor pointed out that she was in a violent relationship, Norma explained that she engaged in a process of rumination that culminated in the realization that her counselor was correct:

In my mind, you know, I kept saying to myself, you know, you're not getting hit....these are just anger issues he needs to work out and all of those things. And yes, there were anger issues he needed to work out, but finally I knew that it was better for me not to be in that relationship.

Michelle, age 19, initially disclosed details of her relationship to a nurse at a family planning clinic, where she had gone to get tested for sexually transmitted diseases. Michelle explained,

She talked for two hours about abusive relationships. I realized I was in one and needed to get out...[she] made me realize I was in a bad situation, and that I needed to find the strength - that I needed to, to free myself from him. If I hadn't talked to her about it, then I probably wouldn't have realized.

Michelle noted that despite this important realization, the decision to leave her partner was gradual. She admitted that it took many days and months of questioning her own motives and actions in order to truly believe that she deserved to be treated better, and to leave her boyfriend permanently.

Other participants explained that friends or family members helped them to realize that the way their partners treated them should be considered abusive. Winona explained that a friend of hers "gave me a piece of paper that listed, like, signs of an abusive relationship. And it kinda freaked me out, because he had all of them." The realization that she was being abused motivated her to tell her boyfriend that they should

see other people, so that she could eventually break up with him. Heather explained a realization that the violence in her relationship was likely to become progressively worse after her abusive boyfriend made her a dress to wear, in an effort to further control her. When she told her mother about the dress, her mother

just kind of flipped out on me...she's like, "Don't you see what's going on?"...and it was just the thing that was able to let me look back over all the steps leading up to...the point where I was at now...(it) made me realize that it wasn't getting any better and it's not at all ever getting better.

Soon after this realization, Heather made the decision to move out of state and start a new life without her abuser so that she wouldn't be tempted to return to him.

Sophia, age 19, cited her growing awareness of the mounting nature of the violence against her as a wake-up call to realizing she needed to break up with her abusive boyfriend. The combination of her parents convincing her she should break ties with her partner and a decrease in her denial about the serious nature of the violence against her helped her to make the decision to leave her partner. She noted that she had previously "tolerated it, minimized it. I didn't realize how bad it was getting until I stopped and thought how in the beginning he might grab me and want me to listen to him, and then he would shake and push me."

Changes in perception of violent partner. Sixteen percent of women ($n = 20$) explained that their perceptions of their violent partner changed rather significantly over the course of the relationship. Initial perceptions of partners were, not surprisingly, positive, but these perceptions became increasingly negative as the abuse worsened and as women began to feel more and more hopeless about their situation. For the majority of

these participants, coming to the realization that their violent partner was not likely to change despite strong hopes to the contrary played an important role in stay-leave decision-making.

Jessica, age 20, realized that her boyfriend of over two years had a serious problem with violence when she went with him and his cousin on a fishing trip. Prior to that trip, her boyfriend had gone so far as to grab her roughly during an argument and push things out of frustration when she was around. However, on the fishing trip, he took this a step further when he “threw me up against the car and then went back to fishing with his cousin.” In that moment, Jessica realized that he had a serious problem with violence and began the process of leaving him gradually, which entailed establishing new friendships and gradually building a life outside of her romantic relationship.

Karen, age 42, explained that she left her violent husband because she could no longer believe the lies he told to cover up his extensive drug use. Because of these lies, she had come to doubt his true feelings for her. She noted,

I guess that is what really made us break up, is because I finally realized I couldn't trust him. The lies and the taking advantage...seems like they're only out for their own best interests, maybe they don't really care for you, maybe they don't love you, maybe he never really loved me...my God, the mind is so complex, that you can think that somebody loves you because you want to be loved so bad.

Similarly, Jacinda came to terms with her denial about being in an abusive marriage when, after 21 years, she decided to pursue a divorce, a decision which directly conflicted with her religious beliefs. Jacinda was able to make the difficult decision to

leave her husband when she was able to sufficiently reframe the situation in a way that continued to fit with her religious beliefs, explaining:

I had a hard time dealing with the fact that I would be breaking a vow that I had made when we got married. And I really struggled with that for a long time, until I finally processed it to the point where I decided that he misrepresented himself at the altar, so there really wasn't a vow to be broken in the first place, because he wasn't the person he had made himself out to be.

The majority of women reported that an emergent perception that their partners' behavior was not going to change instigated thoughts about leaving them permanently. Wendy explained that the turning point in her relationship which motivated her to leave her abusive boyfriend was when "I realized he'd never change unless he wanted to help himself." Wendy noted that this realization came following a long period of introspection about her violent relationship. Similarly, Eileen, age 46, survived a marriage of 21 years during which the violence progressed slowly and gradually, in concordance with the escalation of her husband's drinking problem. Although her husband attended counseling with her for a short time, Eileen explained that she decided to leave him because he remained in denial about his drinking problem and his anger issues. She noted, "It was more of a gradual process on my part, that I could see it wasn't changing."

Joree, age 26, concurred that after one a half years in an abusive relationship, she started to realize that her boyfriend was not likely to change his violent behavior in the future. She explained, "During the relationship I thought I could change him if I stayed with him, and make things better. I just realized that wasn't going to happen." This realization occurred to Joree after a friend pointed out to her that her boyfriend's behavior

was abusive. Kim, age 42, explained that she went to work in tears every day while living with her abusive boyfriend. One day she disclosed the abuse to her coworker, who brought her pamphlets about domestic violence. Kim noted that she finally asked her abuser to leave because

basically, because I read those papers over and over. It said they don't change. Once they are abusers, they don't change. I thought maybe he will change, and I felt bad for him. He was this poor guy, this drunk; maybe I can fix him.

Holly explained that because she was young and naïve when she dated her abuser, she didn't have a support system at the time, and thus didn't have anyone to help her to realize that she was in an abusive relationship. For her, it was a longer road to leaving because "I always thought people could change, and some people can't change. It was hard to swallow and accept that and tough it out."

For Isabella, the realization that her boyfriend would not change, coupled with the awareness that the relationship was harming her, led to a decision to end her relationship. She stated, "It was just that I realized that this was just a cycle and it wouldn't get any better if I stayed. And I definitely wouldn't feel good about myself if I stayed." Similarly, Kristen survived an abusive marriage of fourteen years, but eventually decided to leave her husband when she realized that she could not change his behavior, and that she had spent too many years forgetting to care for herself. She stated, "I could see that I was not going to change things, and they had gotten as bad as it could get, you know, before...it would be a steady decline until I was dead."

Intolerance of Abuse

Nineteen percent of women ($n = 24$) reported that at one point during their violent relationship, they began more strongly to consider leaving their partners because of abusive behavior that pushed either their physical or emotional limits. Seven women reported that a particular act of physical violence by their partner motivated them to leave him for good.

Jennifer explained that “one of my turning points was when he finally hit me and threw me against the wall. And I said, ‘This is ridiculous.’” Jennifer explained that because the physical abuse against her had been so gradual, it had taken her a long time to admit to herself that she was a victim of abuse. This extreme act of physical violence, along with a renewed sense of strength and confidence, forced her out of denial and instigated her decision to eventually leave her violent partner. Cindy, age 51, had finally mustered the courage to tell her husband she was going to file for divorce after many years of tolerating horrendous acts of physical and emotional abuse. She called out to her husband that she was going to leave him while sitting on the toilet, at which time he brutally attacked her. Cindy was so upset that he had attacked her at that vulnerable moment that she decided that was the last act of abuse she would tolerate. She noted, “I just decided I didn’t have to put up with that.”

Diana explained that she decided to leave her abusive boyfriend when he was violent towards their therapist in session. She noted,

At that point, I made the decision that I wasn’t going to do this again, because I had already been through, you know, a couple of these [violent relationships], and I really didn’t want to put my children through it anymore. I didn’t want to go through it

anymore myself.

Joanne, a 56 year-old woman who survived a marriage to a man she had left 11 times temporarily over an eight-year period, explained that she reached her physical limit when her husband beat her so badly one day that he left the house not knowing if she was still alive. She explained that this act of violence was so vicious that she knew she could no longer tolerate the physical abuse. Joanne stated,

And he actually went to his brother's to tell him to come and see if I was still alive.

And when he came, I just told him that I had been going through this all the years of my marriage and I just couldn't do it anymore.

Joanne noted that her religious beliefs had previously kept her from pursuing divorce. However, after this final beating, she came to peace with the fact that it was her husband's choice to harm her, and that God would never have condoned such harmful acts against her. Joanne explained, "I finally [left]. It took me months, but I finally had to say God did not mean [for me to be harmed] by his hand."

Susan, age 46, had left an abusive family of origin to marry a man who "took over where my parents left off." She was married to this abusive man for twenty years, and like Joanne, she hadn't seriously considered leaving him because she had been taught that divorce was against God's will. Susan birthed eight children while she and her husband lived in a closed, religious community which she referred to in her interview as a cult. Although Susan's husband beat her regularly, he was not physically abusive to their children. After a severe beating by her husband, Susan made the extremely difficult decision of leaving her husband, which meant leaving behind her children with him in

their small community in order to save their lives. This was the only solution that Susan could elicit which would ensure her and her children's survival. Susan explained,

I had children and I didn't want to lose them, but there came a day when I knew I would be dead and my children would be standing over my grave, or I would be in a mental hospital. Neither of those were answers to the problem.

Other women explained that they began to think seriously about leaving their violent partners when they reached an extreme emotional limit. Seventeen women (13%) described getting to a point where they couldn't take the emotional toll of the abuse against them and thus had to leave their partners to avoid "going off the deep end."

Many women reported that the realization that they were unhappy was enough to motivate them to find a way to leave their violent partners. Joely explained that a turning point in her relationship came when "I decided it wasn't what I wanted....as I look back now, from the time we got married 'til I left, I really can't think of any time there was any joy." Similarly, Lauren, whose violent relationship in her early twenties had started to take a strong emotional toll, stated, "I finally realized I wasn't happy. I was tired of being miserable." Once she felt better about herself and had built a healthy support system of friends, Lauren was able to find the strength to move on from her violent boyfriend.

Some women reported that more extreme emotional states served as catalysts for ending their relationships permanently. Katrina, a 35 year-old woman who survived a three-year abusive marriage, reached a point where she was so emotionally spent from the abuse and its effects on her children that she called the police and had her husband

incarcerated for an assault against her. She explained reaching her emotional limit in the following manner:

I knew I couldn't take it anymore...every day he was screaming and yelling at me and physically hurting...[and] sexually trying to force himself on me...so it was just the combination of trying to get my kids away and just knowing that there's no way I – I just couldn't – I was, I felt I was going off the deep end, you know.

Anna echoed these sentiments: “I had been crying every single day for so long; [I was] just a mess.” Ultimately, both Katrina and Anna left their violent partners in order to decrease their distress, and improve their chances to find future happiness.

Other participants described experiencing such an excess of one particular emotion that they could no longer tolerate the associated distress. Diana described being so angry at being belittled that she firmly told her abusive boyfriend in a fit of rage to leave. Prior to that, she had always avoided expressing her anger, for fear of retaliation. Staci explained, “I lived every day in fear and I woke up one morning wanting to eliminate that fear. And the thought of eliminating the man was in my mind, and that was so out of character that I thought I had to leave.” This fear, coupled with a sense of hopelessness that there would be no end to her abuse, motivated Staci to leave her violent boyfriend permanently.

An enormous sense of shame overwhelmed Amanda, Beth, and Chandra to the point that they could no longer tolerate feeling horrible about themselves and constantly blaming themselves for their choice to remain in an abusive relationship. These women explained that during their violent relationships, intense shame actually served as a motivational tool for healing and help-seeking. Beth admitted,

I think it just got to the point where I was feeling so much shame. It was such an exhausting feeling. I was tired of feeling badly all the time. I think it encouraged me to talk to other people. I think I felt it to be such an unnecessary evil in my life that it encouraged me.

Similarly, for Chandra, shame played a role in seeking the support of others because “I wanted to feel better about myself.”

Amber, Pat, and Norma explained that intense guilt influenced each of them in some way to question why they had remained with their violent partners for so long, and that this emotion ultimately influenced them to leave. Norma explained the “guilt was the #1 reason” she stayed with her violent boyfriend for a year, even though she didn’t love him and didn’t want to be in a committed relationship at age 22. However, going to counseling helped her to realize that guilt was not the right reason to stay in the relationship or to tolerate physical and emotional abuse. An emerging awareness of her guilt and related unhappiness led Norma to leave her violent boyfriend permanently.

Amber left her abusive boyfriend after their daughter was born, because she didn’t want to subject her child to violence. Just before she left, Amber sought counseling to decrease associated guilt. Of pursuing counseling while she was still in a violent relationship, Amber explained, “I’d get concerned because I felt like I was betraying him [by seeking help], but it wasn’t so intensified, because I knew if I was just able to get past it and get out, then the feelings of guilt would change to achievement.” Ultimately, guilt motivated Amber to find a way to feel better about herself and her choice to leave.

Pat concurred that the desire to transform guilt into a more positive emotion helped motivate her to leave her violent boyfriend. Pat stated, “I mean, guilt can be a

motivator. 'I hate this guilt, I want to change my life.' That is part of the motivator to leave the relationship. 'I hate these feelings; they are harming me. I am not going on creating more guilt and shame in my life.'"

Improved Coping Skills

Six percent of women ($n = 7$) reported that they found novel ways to feel strong or empowered while they were in an abusive relationship despite being treated poorly by their partners and often feeling as if their situation was hopeless. Kate began to cultivate a passion for reading and other hobbies as a way of keeping her mood bright and keeping her mind off of relational distress. Similarly, Kristen, who survived a fourteen-year abusive marriage to a rancher, learned how to defend herself, and boost her self-esteem, in the following way: "What I did to feel better about myself and to feel more in control of the situation was that I became really good at, you know, shooting and target practice and stuff like this."

Three women noted that they began a practice of writing during the relationship as a way to reflect upon and process their experiences and to express painful emotions. Georgia, a woman who lived in a small reservation town and didn't want anyone to know she was in a violent marriage, used poetry to cope with her extreme distress and anger. She stated,

I remember writing a lot of poetry. Just going so far inside myself, you know, when the kids would nap or whatever. And I would scream at God, you know, 'Why me?'

Fully knowing I had a choice here to make, and then blaming myself.

Georgia explained that she finally left her husband when she realized "there was nothing left to salvage", and she accepted that he wasn't going to change and that she no longer

wanted to expose her children to violence. After years of writing to vent and try to understand her feelings, Georgia reported that she has since learned to reach out and seek support, she can laugh about certain aspects of the experience, she has forgiven her ex-husband and made peace with what occurred during their marriage, and that she overall learned a lot about herself and others through this experience.

Kathy, who was in an abusive relationship for just four months, explained that during this entire time, she evaluated the validity of her choice to stay with an abusive boyfriend. She reported, “I evaluated it during [the relationship]...I evaluated it and kind thought about it. I journaled a lot about it.” Kathy credited her writing with helping her to realize relatively quickly that she was involved in an unhealthy relationship, a thought that ultimately motivated her to end it. Susan, who survived twenty years of violence and life inside what she referred to as a cult, kept daily journals and various writings that she hoped would one day comprise a book that would inspire other women to evade abusive relationships. She explained, “I questioned myself and wrote notes and kept compilations for my book...you go every day to put the pieces back together. The pieces are shattered and you are trying to pick them up.”

Summary of Growth Experiences During a Violent Relationship

Participants reported a wide variety of healing steps toward posttraumatic growth in the form of changed cognitions and emotions while they were still in a violent relationship. These changes appeared to serve as catalysts that influenced women in idiosyncratic ways to ultimately leave their abusive partners. It is important to note that a wide variety of factors influenced women to end their abusive relationships, and that even women who reported similar types of positive changes did not follow one patterned or

proscribed pathway to leaving their violent partners. As has been described in the literature and by researchers who have already reported findings from the Montana Domestic Violence Project, this analysis confirms that the process of stay-leave decision-making is, indeed, complex, difficult, multifaceted, and fraught with ambivalence for women (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Brown et al., 2005; Fiore-Lerner & Kennedy, 2000; Kennedy, 1999; Paluso, 2003; Taylor, 2003; Ulrich, 1991).

Nearly two-thirds of women denoted specific alterations in the ways they began to relate to others outside of their romantic relationship while they were still with a violent partner. Women who reported positive changes in outside relationships during this time seemed to be searching for others to support, validate, and challenge the nature of their romantic relationships. Participants who sought social support despite being threatened by their partners did so for two reasons: either in an attempt to soothe intense psychological distress, or in order to understand the dynamics within their romantic relationship.

For many participants, the positive social support they received during a violent relationship played an instrumental role in the decision to leave. Counselors were particularly influential in motivating women to leave their violent partners, although the types of techniques counselors used to elicit change in participants varied considerably. Some women appreciated when therapists directly stated concerns for their safety, urging them to leave their partners, while other women preferred to be listened to and to come to this very difficult decision independently. The majority of participants who sought professional psychological assistance during their relationship, despite potentially adverse consequences, described undergoing a long process of rumination through which

they ultimately realized that they had to leave their violent partners for the sake of their safety and health.

Other women reported that they felt an obligation to leave their violent partners once they began to recognize that their romantic relationship was causing harm to other family members. Some participants came to this realization following specific violent events or threats of violent events against them or their children, while others noted a more gradual accumulative understanding that their children were being either directly or indirectly harmed by the relationship. Several participants noted a specific desire to end the cycle of abuse with their children or to leave partners as a way to alleviate fears that their children might become batterers or victims.

One important finding was that decisions to leave a violent partner often occurred after a long process of intense reflection about the relationship, during which women realized they deserved to be treated better. For most women, this process was facilitated by supportive others, although some women reported arriving at this realization on their own. Regardless of the way women arrived at this realization, all of them noted that at the beginning of their violent relationships, they felt they had done something to deserve the abuse or that they must have elicited abuse from their partner because there was something wrong with them. The subset of women who reported that the inspiration to leave a violent partner derived from an inner process explained that this process was characterized by a great deal of rumination and accompanying distress. In some cases, distressful emotions influenced these women to leave their partners. In other cases, rumination about the relationship coupled with an emergent awareness that the abuse was not their fault led to women's decisions to leave.

The remainder of women realized they deserved to be treated better after 1) allowing themselves to accept help from friends or family members, 2) spending time away from their abuser in the presence of supportive others, or 3) reaching a physical or emotional limit after which they were no longer willing to tolerate abuse. Participants who accepted support offered by friends, family members, or future romantic partners explained that initially, they had spent a great deal of time denying, hiding, or being ashamed that they were in a violent relationship. According to these participants, family members and future romantic partners seemed to provide the best unconditional support at a time when these battered women needed them most. In addition, friends and community members seemed to serve as a mirror for these women, in that the concern or insight they provided often helped participants realize the extreme or unhealthy nature of their romantic relationship. After accepting help from others, these women began to realize that they deserved better treatment in a romantic relationship, a belief which strongly influenced their decisions to ultimately leave their violent partners.

Another way that supportive others helped women to realize that they deserved to be treated better in a romantic relationship was to provide a positive refuge for them when they spent time away from their abuser. These participants noted that encouraging, self-affirming experiences which occurred during absences from their abuser in the presence of supportive friends and family members were instrumental in changing their perceptions of the violent relationship. Being around individuals who did not attempt to restrict, control, harm, or threaten them helped these participants to realize not only that they deserved to be treated better by their romantic partners, but also that the benefits of the violent relationship did not outweigh the drawbacks. In particular, battered wives who

left the home to return to the workforce seemed to benefit the most in terms of time away from violent partners. Achieving success outside the home in the context of coworkers who made them feel supported and validated helped these women build the confidence and the strength they needed to leave a violent partner.

A final catalyst that influenced women to leave their abusive partners was reaching a physical or emotional limit, after which they felt they could no longer tolerate that form of abuse. For the women who reached physical limits, one particularly harmful or humiliating act motivated them to realize they deserved better in a romantic relationship. Other women reached an emotional state where they could no longer tolerate being unhappy, shameful, guilty, or fearful for their lives on a regular basis. These women decided to leave their violent partners as a means of emotional self-preservation, in hopes that once they found a way to decrease the negative emotions they had experienced during the relationship, they might be able to find true happiness.

Many women additionally reported growth in the form of changes in the way they perceived their violent relationship while they were still in the relationship. Specifically, when women began defining their relationship as abusive or their partner as violent, they began to realize that it might not be in their best interest to remain in the relationship. Prior to the emergence of these new perceptions, these women had normalized the violence against them, attributed blame to themselves for the violence, or denied the extent of the abuse in order to cope with their decision to remain with a violent partner. In most cases, women began to perceive their romantic relationship as violent based on the influence of supportive others, such as counselors, family members, or friends, who often

provided participants with information about the cycle of abuse and patterns of violent individuals, or reflected to women that they deserved better.

Women who experienced changed perceptions of their abuser during the relationship also emerged from denial to arrive at a place where they began to realize gradually either the dangerous nature of the abuse, or the fact that their violent partner was not likely to stop being abusive. The majority of participants stayed with their partners after initial displays of violence because they were hopeful that the abuse would not occur regularly. However, as women began to see the accumulative nature of the abuse and that their partners were not trying to change their violent behavior, they came to the gradual realization that they should end the relationship. Some women realized that their partner would not change after gaining information from friends or family members about patterns enacted by abusive individuals, while others arrived at this place after a long process of rumination and consideration of their future.

Finally, many women cultivated a sense of personal strength during their violent relationship by purposely engaging in activities that built their confidence and self-esteem. Some women engaged in meaningful hobbies that served to protect them, keep them in good spirits, and distract themselves from negative emotions associated with their romantic relationship. A subset of women engaged in creative writing as a way to reflect upon their negative emotions and process their experience in a violent relationship. These women described coming to peace with their experience, and sometimes with their violent partners, after years of writing and thinking about the nature of their abusive relationship. For these women, engaging in positive, self-affirming

activities helped them retain a sense of their own identity, build their confidence, and ultimately empower them to move on from their violent relationships.

It is worthy to note that the positive life changes reported while women were in the process of stay-leave decision-making may have represented an initiation of the process of posttraumatic growth for some or all of these women, a development which is assumed to occur gradually as victims struggle to emotionally and cognitively cope with trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004). Although Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) theorized that posttraumatic growth is an outcome that occurs *after* a trauma ends rather than a coping mechanism employed *during* a trauma, their research has largely focused on describing growth that occurs following single traumatic events. Intimate partner violence, on the other hand, is typically comprised of an ongoing series of traumatic events perpetrated by individuals with whom survivors experience an intense emotional attachment (i.e., complex trauma). It is possible, then, that particular violent events within some women's abusive relationships are impactful enough to begin to shatter women's fundamental assumptions about who they are and what other individuals are capable of doing *while they are still in the relationship*. Yet although Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) acknowledged that within trauma survivors' reconsiderations of identity, relationships, and worldviews, "there are seeds for new perspectives on all these matters and a sense that valuable, though painful, lessons have been learned" (p. 409), they made no further mention of how and when such seeds are planted other than to describe pre-trauma and post-trauma characteristics.

Multiple characteristics of these findings imply that the positive changes described by some participants during their violent relationships may have represented an

initiation of the process of posttraumatic growth. Similar to findings from other research in posttraumatic growth (summarized in Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), some women in this sample discovered the power of positive social support and began to conceptualize both romantic and non-romantic relationships differently *while they were still in a violent relationship*. Rather than hiding from others out of guilt and shame, many participants learned to seek out friends, family members, and therapists for support in an effort to feel validated and to understand the dynamics within their abusive relationships. Through this process, these women learned who their real friends were, became increasingly comfortable with intimacy, and experienced “an increased sense of their own capacities to survive and prevail,” experiences described previously by Tedeschi and Calhoun as typical of individuals who undergo posttraumatic growth (p. 406).

In addition, many women reported that they didn’t like who they’d become while they were in a violent relationship, and that this discrepant self-view motivated them to change their behavior to match a new, healthier conception of themselves. This finding is also consistent with individuals who display posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Like many who experience posttraumatic growth, several women in this sample also experienced therapy relationships as catalysts for growth in the sense that these supportive relationships provided them with enhanced strength, validation, insight, and a place to cognitively and emotionally process the abuse while it was occurring.

These findings indicate that the process of posttraumatic growth for some individuals who experience ongoing trauma may be initiated during the trauma itself. A subset of women in this sample described a painful but ultimately inspirational awakening process over the course of their violent relationships. This awakening was

characterized by a gradual emergence of strength, empowerment, and help-seeking behaviors which helped them to realize they deserved better within relationships. Notably, female survivors of intimate partner violence in this sample did not report the occurrence of the same variety and magnitude of positive changes during their abusive relationship as they did in the aftermath of their violent relationships. However, positive changes reported by participants during their violent relationships seemed to persist and to become enhanced in the aftermath of violent relationships (see following section).

A note of caution should be applied to these findings due to the temporal nature of this data. Participants were included in this sample because they had already left a violent relationship. Therefore, reflections from women about how they functioned *during* their abusive relationship may not reflect with certainty their true experiences *while* they were in the relationship. It is possible that due to the growth women experienced in the aftermath of their violent relationship, they interpreted their actions within the relationship *upon later reflection* in a more growth-oriented fashion (i.e., through a new lens of positive reappraisal) than they might have were they to be interviewed while *still in* an abusive relationship. In other words, the choice to include only participants who had been out of a violent relationship for a year in the current study may have biased the findings that women reported growth during their violent relationship due to the retrospective nature of the task.

Posttraumatic Growth

One hundred thirteen women (89%) reported multiple positive changes that occurred in their lives in the aftermath of a violent relationship. Six major themes emerged that the principal researcher characterized as separate forms of posttraumatic

growth. These themes included changes in: 1) relationships, 2) self-perception, 3) cognitive appraisal of the violent relationship, 4) life goals, 5) coping or behavior, and 6) spirituality or religious beliefs. Table 3 shows the demographic characteristics of women in this sample whose quotes were selected to represent experiences indicative of posttraumatic growth. Figure 2 compares the types of growth found during the process of stay-leave decision-making and the types of posttraumatic growth described in the aftermath of violent relationships.

The majority of women reported the occurrence of growth in many of the above areas in the year(s) since they had left their violent relationship. The number of different types of posttraumatic growth women experienced ranged from 0 to 11, with a modal experience of three different types of posttraumatic growth. Figure 3 (inset) displays the number and percentage of women who reported multiple types of posttraumatic growth.

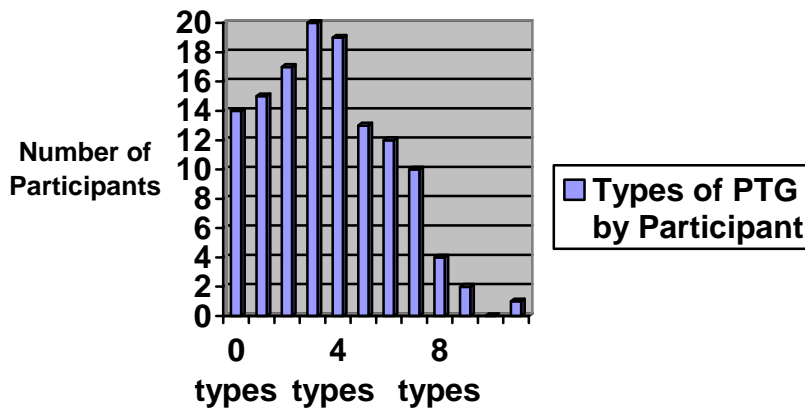


Figure 3. Number of Different Types of Posttraumatic Growth Reported by Number of Participants

Changes in Relationships

Eighty percent of participants ($n = 102$) described the presence of at least one positive change in either romantic or non-romantic relationships in the aftermath of their violent relationship. These changes occurred in the way women: 1) reacted to their ex-partners in situations where they chose to, or were forced to, maintain contact, 2) behaved with new romantic partners, 3) viewed relationships with family or friends, or 4) reacted to or thought about other women who were in abusive relationships, in the form of wanting to help these individuals.

Of these 102 participants, 44% of women ($n = 45$) described one positive change that occurred in non-romantic and romantic relationships in the aftermath of their violent relationship, 32% ($n = 33$) reported two changes, 23% ($n = 23$) reported three changes, and 1% ($n = 1$) reported four changes. Two common outcomes for women who described multiple types of positive changes within their relationships included growth in the form of healthier behaviors with new romantic partners as well as with friends, family members, or therapists in the aftermath of violence, or changes in reactions to one's ex-partner in concurrence with behavioral changes in subsequent romantic relationships.

Thirty-four percent of women who reported positive changes in relationships in the aftermath of their violent relationships ($n = 35$) also reported growth in relationships during the process of stay-leave decision-making. This indicates that some of the growth women experienced in their relationships during the process of stay-leave decision-making may have served as the seeds for growth in relationships that occurred *after* they left a violent partner.

Changes in reaction to ex-partner. Twenty-seven percent of women ($n = 34$) who either had to maintain contact with their violent ex-partners for the sake of their children, because they lived in the same town, or because they chose to do so, explained that over time, they have learned healthier ways to relate to their ex-partners. These positive changes were categorized as cognitive, emotional, or behavioral in nature. Cognitive and emotional changes took the form of less charged emotional responses, emergent feelings of compassion for ex-partners, and novel ways of thinking about interactions with one's partner. A common behavioral change included learning to set more effective boundaries in subsequent interactions. While most women endorsed one type of change in the way they related to ex-partners in the aftermath of their violent relationships, seven participants described two or more positive changes. These included multiple ways of changing behavior towards ex-partners or decreases in negative emotions followed by increases in compassion for ex-partners.

The majority of changes women reported in terms of the new ways they have learned to relate to violent ex-partners were considered examples of posttraumatic growth *in process* rather than examples of an *outcome* of posttraumatic growth. For example, many women reported feeling apathetic or numb when thinking about a violent partner at the time of their interview, in contrast to previous experiences of intense fear or rage. Many women explained that this sense of apathy or numbness had arisen after they had allowed themselves to let go of intensely negative emotions about their abusive ex-partners. Apathy and numbness, while not often considered healthy, were categorized as growth nonetheless because they appeared to protect women from experiencing more aversive emotions. These emotional changes were, however, considered growth *in*

process because they did not appear to be fully resolved. It is possible that the experience of apathy or numbness also may have served as an interim step towards eventual positive reappraisal or forgiveness of ex-partners, although such information is not available due to temporal restrictions on this data. Additionally, these experiences were labeled as growth because each participant who described feeling apathetic or numb also noted that they were happy that thoughts of their partner no longer elicited negative emotions.

Less charged emotional responses. Two percent of women ($n = 3$) explained that, at the time of their interview, when they thought back to their violent relationship, they experienced less charged emotions towards their ex-partners in general. Each of these participants reported the presence of a limited amount of social support during their relationship, which decreased their desire to seek help from counselors, friends, or family members after the relationship ended. These women credited time as a key factor that allowed them to heal from the relationship, explaining that they now felt somewhat apathetic or numb when they thought back to the experience.

Kaitlin, who was a freshman in high school when she became involved with an abusive boyfriend, made the choice to leave that boyfriend after he pushed her down some stairs. After this yearlong relationship, Kaitlin didn't date anyone else for a year. Although she reported that she continues to experience difficulty trusting men, Kaitlin described the following change in the way she experienced her ex-boyfriend: "I used to hate him. I can tell now. I used to burst into tears. I have healed a lot. I'm kind of numb. In my junior year it dawned on me that I don't care." Jordan, who married her abusive husband at age 19, left him after she found out he was having an affair with a 15 year-old

girl. Jordan explained that she has chosen to remain friends with her ex-husband, as he has started to treat her with more respect since she began reacting to him less defensively.

Six percent of women ($n = 7$) explained that they felt empowered because they were no longer afraid of their abusive ex-partners. According to these participants, this gradual decrease in fear occurred once they had enough time away from their partners to recognize that they were strong enough to handle ongoing contact with them without falling back into old patterns of fear and deference. For these women, the reduction of intense emotions appeared to be coupled with an increase in self-confidence and positive changes in self-perception.

Charlene explained that after she left her husband, he stalked her for months until one night when he approached her outside a bar with a knife in hand. Instead of resisting the potential attack, Charlene angrily told him, “Ok, gut me. Here I am. I’m sick of this. Gut me like a fish. Get it over with. I am really sick of you and the weird stuff.” Her husband was so surprised that from that point on, he left her alone. She noted that she hasn’t seen him since, but that

For my birthday present that year, I got my divorce. And somehow I was really glad I reached the point where I wasn’t afraid of him anymore, and I let him know, because it was a wonderful feeling to confront him in a non-violent way.

Jessica explained that she sometimes talks to her abusive ex-boyfriend, whose friendship she has attempted to retain, when he comes into town for military training. She noted that after a little over two years without him, she has become less scared when she does see him. Jessica stated, “I used to get nervous if I knew [I’d see him]; now, it doesn’t matter anymore.”

Similarly, Diana has had to maintain contact with her abusive ex-husband in order to facilitate his visits with their son. Diana noted that over the past two years since they separated, she has become less afraid to see her ex-husband in this capacity. She explained, “It’s not so bad now. At first, it was very...I was very panicked and afraid. I couldn’t even stand to look in his direction. My heart would just race. I was very afraid. I’m not now.” Beth, who has had to maintain telephone contact with her ex-husband for the sake of their children, concurred,

It’s very wearing, but it doesn’t get me into such a frenzy like it used to. I used to just kind of get really neurotic after talking to him to begin with, because I still wasn’t sure of myself. I still don’t know if he was telling the truth, or if he was lying.

Beth went on to explain that although she perceived these conversations with her ex-husband as “annoying,” it doesn’t bother her as much because “I know who I’m dealing with now, and I know who I am, so he can’t – he can’t use that psychological manipulation that he used to.”

Jacinda reported that she still has a restraining order in place against her abusive ex-husband of 21 years because as a truck driver, she never knew where he was and if he might be stalking her. She explained at the time of her interview that she was still scared of him, but that this fear had greatly decreased in the two years since she left him. Jacinda described this decrease in fear with the following metaphor:

I’m still afraid of him. I’ll never let my guard completely down. Um, that’s just something I know I’ll have to deal with for the rest of my life; but I now look at him as a pathetic, miserable, sorry excuse for a human being. If I were to draw a picture a year ago, he would have been this huge, ominous-looking, controlling thing over me

in the picture. And now he's a big piece of shit on the bottom of my shoe.

Two percent of women ($n = 2$) noted that the extreme anger they had felt during their violent relationship had dissipated in the time since they left their abusive partners. Victoria, age 44, was an alcoholic during her violent relationship. Her boyfriend of eight years had become physically abusive after their fifth year together. Victoria explained that when she was intoxicated, she would become verbally abusive to her boyfriend, who would respond with physical and verbal abuse. As part of her recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous, she called him eleven years later to make amends. Victoria was happy to report that when they talked, there was no longer any anger between them.

Similarly, Miranda, age 33, had left her abusive boyfriend of almost two years after she realized that he might kill her one day. Miranda explained that she never understood why he hurt her so badly during their relationship, and that she subsequently "hated him for years." Through counseling, Miranda was able to rebuild her self-esteem and overcome her anger towards her partner, whom she reported that she pitied at the time of her interview because she realized he needed help.

Feelings of compassion for ex-partner. Thirteen percent of women ($n = 16$) reported at the time of their interview that they currently espoused feelings of forgiveness towards, or compassion for, their ex-partners. Most of these participants explained that since their violent relationship ended, they have come to view their partners as sick, unhappy, or unhealthy, and in need of help rather than blame. In particular, women who described themselves as spiritual or religious appeared to be the most forgiving of their violent ex-partners. However, despite these women's claims that they had definitively forgiven their ex-partners, their endorsements of forgiveness were considered

posttraumatic growth in process because their statements about forgiveness were interspersed with ongoing ambivalence about their ex-partners.

Four percent of participants ($n = 5$) noted that since their separation or divorce from an abusive partner, they have begun to view their ex-partner's violent behavior as a logical result of an abusive childhood. Alex explained that she stayed with her ex-husband for seventeen years partially because he was so depressed she was afraid he would commit suicide. Through counseling, she realized eventually that she made the right decision to leave, but Alex continued to express compassion for him at the time of her interview:

I wish him the best...I've prayed that he finds some understanding and realization to where his life has brought him – his childhood – what possibly made him react the way he has to life situations and stuff.

However, Alex noted that when she watched how her ex-husband treated their son, she couldn't help but still feel anger towards him despite these feelings of compassion.

Carmen, age 19, concurred that her forgiveness for a violent ex-boyfriend arose from an understanding of how his abusive behavior had its roots in his own abusive family of origin. Carmen explained that she was aware during the relationship that her ex-boyfriend had “a terrible family life”, and that during the relationship, she used this as an excuse for his behavior. She noted that since time has passed, she has more compassion for him because of his history, stating, “I forgive him for putting me through all that, because he did have some major issues.” However, Carmen was clear in her interview that just because she has forgiven her ex-boyfriend doesn't mean that she would ever speak kindly or with compassion to him if she ever saw him again.

Similarly, Kayla, whose boyfriend, like her, was an alcoholic, explained that she was happy she decided to leave him when she did. However, since the break-up, Kayla had become aware that his abusive actions while intoxicated may have had something to do with his childhood history of neglect. Kayla noted,

I feel very sad for him. At times when he was sober, he would tell me about his life as a child, and it was just an ugly mess. His parents were drug addicts and he just didn't have a very good upbringing, and so I think he is just really truly a product of his upbringing.

Nonetheless, Kayla explained that despite feeling compassion for her ex-partner, she still thought of him as a horrible person.

Other participants with drinking problems of their own noted that as a result of treatment through Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), they have forgiven their ex-partners as a way of making spiritual amends. Leslie, age 59, had been a member of AA for nineteen years when she met her abusive husband, who was a drinker. She stopped attending meetings during their marriage, but she returned to AA after the divorce as a means of retaining her sobriety and gaining social support. Although Leslie viewed her ex-husband's behavior during their relationship as unacceptable and dangerous at the time of her interview, she explained that, as part of the process of making amends, she was trying to forgive him nonetheless. Leslie explained that this process hadn't been as hard as she imagined because when she last saw her ex-husband, he expressed remorse for his behavior during their relationship, complimented her on how well she raised their children, and told her that he would always love and adore her. Leslie noted that this

genuine display of emotion helped her to feel less angry toward him, but that she still felt sad for him because she knew if he were to drink again, he'd still be likely to act abusive.

Similarly, Gina explained that the desire to make amends as part of her AA treatment, coupled with her faith in the Bible, had allowed her to forgive her perpetrator, although at the time she was in an abusive relationship, "the hatred was great." Nonetheless, she explained, "If I watch a marriage and see abuse, it haunts me."

Sally, age 49, survived a nearly eleven-year marriage to an abusive man whom she finally left in order to give herself and her sons a chance at a healthy and happy life. Sally, a Christian during her marriage, sought Christian counseling after it ended as a way of dealing with "a madness of anger I was feeling." Through counseling, Sally explained that "I was able to forgive him and even to see he loved me the best he knew how."

Similarly, Kari, who had a violent relationship during high school that was "devastating to me," stated that "I've forgiven [my ex-boyfriend]...I've done a lot of praying about it and feel that I needed to forgive – just get past that point in my life." Yet Kari admitted that she hasn't seen her ex-partner in five years, and that she didn't know exactly how she might react if she ever saw him again.

Other women stated that they wanted to forgive their violent ex-partners and were working hard to accomplish this daunting emotional task, but that they had not reached the point where they could say they truly forgave them. Darlene, who received support from a priest during her marriage and from a counselor after her marriage ended, explained that she was doing her best to forgive her abusive ex-husband of eleven years by "trying to be enlightened; walking that path." She noted that she felt part of her healing process should entail forgiving her ex-husband, even though she experienced

ongoing ambivalence toward him. Darlene stated, “I’m sure I have love for him, and there is a lot of hate for him, but if push came to shove and I saw him injured on the side of the road, I’m sure I would stop.”

Cheryl, age 40, had not seen her abusive husband of four and a half years since their divorce, but she reported struggling in the aftermath of the divorce with intense feelings of anger towards him. She noted that she had avoided seeking help because she was afraid to, and avoidant of, delving into her true feelings. However, three weeks before her interview, Cheryl sought counseling for the first time, telling her interviewer that she wanted to try to work through her anger so she could learn to forgive her husband. Her desire to forgive her husband came out of knowledge of his abusive childhood. Cheryl told her interviewer that she hoped she could find a way to reconcile his actions within their relationship by explaining it as a function of his history rather than as an act he enacted against her willingly. Cheryl noted that her attempts to reconcile these thoughts on her own had not resulted in forgiveness thus far.

Boundary-setting and assertiveness with ex-partner. Twelve percent of women ($n = 15$) described various approaches they have taken to set new and healthier limits with their ex-partners in the aftermath of a violent relationship. Many of these women explained that they have been able to set boundaries effectively after strengthening their sense of self and learning to believe that they should not tolerate further manipulation by their ex-partners. These cognitive changes appeared to set the stage for participants to make subsequent behavioral changes in their interactions with ex-partners. Yet although some women noted that they have been able to make consistent changes in the way they relate to a violent partner, others explained that this process had been haphazard and

intermittent, as they continued to struggle with guilt and difficulty asserting their true feelings in the presence of an ex-partner.

Beth explained, “I know who I’m dealing with now, and I know who I am, so he can’t – he can’t use that psychological manipulation he used to. I just hold my ground.” Mickey concurred that when she sees her violent ex-husband at family gatherings, “I just have a lot more feelings of taking care of me, and you know, why bother being here?” Staci explained that she purposely remains emotionally distant from her ex-husband in order to feel stronger and more independent. Similarly, Jacinda noted,

He could still hurt me, he could still kill me if he wanted, but he would have a fight on his hands this time. Because I now truly believe that he’s no better than I am and I’m not committed to take it from him or anybody else.

Claudia, age 26, reported feeling as if she had lost herself when she was with her violent ex-boyfriend, as she became passive and deferent. After her relationship ended, Claudia spent a significant amount of time with her counselor devising a procedure she could use to decrease her fear and maintain her independence and confidence when she saw her ex-boyfriend around town. She described this process in the following manner:

Before I have contact with him, when I know that I’m gonna see him, I know there’s a procedure that I need to, um, do for myself...I just breathe deeply and I get in, you know, in myself. I just have to get grounded and know exactly what I want to say in the conversation and I also tell myself he’s not gonna – I’m not gonna stoop to his level...so as my counselor put it, I have to get clean and sober before I talk to him; just clear my head.

Other women stated that since they left their violent partners, they have learned to set more appropriate boundaries in subsequent behavioral interactions with them. For many participants, this has taken the form of dictating limits to ex-partners and not allowing these men to manipulate or attempt to alter these limits. Georgia, whose abusive ex-husband still hoped to reconcile at the time of her interview, explained,

I still have contact with him today. And I've let him know in several different ways that we'll never be anything more than friends, and that the friendship that we have today is so much more than we ever had in the relationship that we had.

Georgia described three additional ways that she had set limits with her ex-husband, including making sure she no longer put herself into dangerous or vulnerable situations in his presence, ending conversations abruptly when she felt he was pushing her limits, and letting him know that she didn't need any financial or emotional support from him, despite his regular offers to provide this support.

Staci reported that she was tired of listening to her abusive ex-husband talk incessantly when they were on the phone. She exclaimed that now, "I tell him when I'm done and I don't care if he likes it or not." Jordan explained that she purposely kept conversations superficial whenever she talked to her ex-husband on the phone every few months to see how he was doing.

Nicole, who survived a violent marriage of eighteen years, stated that when her ex-husband called to try to convince her to reconcile with him, she learned to hang up the phone. After a separation period of four years, Nicole also decided to stop transporting her kids for two hours one way to see their father every weekend because she realized she was making more effort than he was to ensure that they remained in close contact. Nicole

stated that ever since she stopped giving in to this demand, her ex-husband's power over her has diminished, and she has begun to feel more independent. However, Nicole reported that she continued to struggle with setting limits with her ex-husband, despite having initiated a healthier romantic relationship with a new man around the time of her interview. Nicole noted, "I'm still learning not to be so complying...It took me a long time to realize that people could love me even if I wasn't perfect."

Changes in subsequent romantic relationships. A second type of change participants reported in the aftermath of their violent relationship entailed growth in the ways they viewed, and behaved within, subsequent romantic relationships. Fifty-four percent of women ($n = 68$) reported that they had made at least one type of positive change in subsequent romantic relationships based on lessons they had learned from their violent relationship. These changes included: 1) changes in relationship ideals, and 2) engaging in healthier behaviors with new partners, including learning how to set firm limits, not tolerating abuse, and experiencing more contentment and less chaos with new partners.

Twelve of these 68 women described the presence of two or more changes in subsequent romantic relationships. The most typical combination of changes manifested as alterations in relationship ideals coupled with improved limit-setting, although women who endorsed multiple types of changes in subsequent romantic relationships reported variations in regards to how this growth manifested.

Changes in relationship ideals. Twenty-five percent of women ($n = 32$) stated that after they ended their violent relationship, they began to view romantic relationships differently, and they became more cautious in their choice of subsequent romantic

partners. By far, the most common change in relationship ideals entailed increased awareness to one's choice of partner and to signs in subsequent romantic partners that might indicate they were capable of violence.

Some women explained that their experience within a violent relationship had helped them to realize what they now wanted in subsequent romantic relationships. Kathy explained that dating a man who was not abusive after she broke up with her violent high school boyfriend helped her to "re-evaluate myself and what I wanted," which included being more appreciated and positively acknowledged by a romantic partner. Similarly, Jordan broke up with her violent high school boyfriend after he threw her on the ground at a drive-in in front of their mutual friends. She noted that since that relationship ended, "Now I'm really picky about the way a guy treats a girl. I'm big into gentleman stuff; holding doors open is really important to me."

Winona's violent relationship had a more radical effect on her relationship ideals. She explained that dating a violent man "led me into a world of being gay, which I think is one of the more positive things."

Chandra stated that her violent relationship taught her that men and women should be treated equally, and that she should not defer her needs to those of a man just because this is what she learned as a child in a violent household. Melanie, whose father was a violent alcoholic and whose first husband was suicidal, noted that she had been initially drawn to her abusive boyfriend because something about the passion this violent man embodied had excited her at the time. However, after she decided to leave him eight years later, Melanie became more cautious about her choice of future romantic partners. She stated, "I feel that I've gotten over that violent, serial relationship need for conflict. I

don't need that at all anymore." Similarly, Katrina explained that since her abusive boyfriend went to prison, which subsequently ended their relationship, her standards have increased, her boundaries have improved, and she has decided she would rather raise her children alone than subject them to further abuse.

Several women noted that their violent relationship taught them to be more aware of their choice of subsequent romantic partners. Sophia said of her first romantic relationship, which included violence, "I think it's made me more aware. If a boyfriend had the signs, it would be hard for me to continue with him in the future. It's made me more appreciative of relationships that are good and healthy." Alisa concurred that once she ended her violent high school relationship, she sought to help others by becoming a crime victim's advocate. Alisa noted that the associated training "made me understand why people stay in relationships like this. I am more aware of who I have relationships with."

Jaclyn stated that her experience with a violent boyfriend helped to improve her "character judgment of people." She explained, "You can kinda tell when a person is not a good person...I just know [now] what type of people that I like and respect, I guess." Similar to Jaclyn, Janna said the following regarding her violent marriage of eight years:

I think it's wised me up quite a bit. I'm smarter. I can read into people a little bit more, now that I've seen the anger. I can meet a person and tell pretty much whether or not they would be the type of person I would like. I've learned a lot about people and how they can be.

Peyton, 26, and Danielle, 25, were both in their late teens at the time they entered a violent relationship. These women explained that they were extremely naïve during the

time they were involved with violent men, but that they planned to make more informed choices in regards to future romantic partners. Victoria and Zoey noted that they have become extremely cautious when entering into new relationships. Both stated that they will no longer tolerate emotional or physical abuse. Katrina, whose children have been impacted by her choice of violent partners, explained that these violent relationships have taught her

that I need to...check into relationships before I just jump in and decided to introduce my children...I really do need to find out about people a little bit and ask myself questions like, “Well, why have they had 20 girlfriends in 6 years?”

Other women noted that they would no longer tolerate specific behaviors or traits that their ex-partners enacted when these behaviors emerged in new romantic partners, because they had associated these factors with the violence they endured. Holly stated that after she ended her violent marriage of six years, she looked for very specific traits in subsequent romantic partners, including whether or not they were respectful of women, had a sense of humor, were easygoing and liked children, and tended to be truthful and have pride in themselves. On a similar note, Celie, age 19, explained that her violent relationship “completely changed the way I view people. I never go on first instincts of person...[It] changed my taste in guys, [I] go for quiet, really skinny guys now, ones I know won’t have any strength against me.”

Tammy, Kristen, Kim, and Holly all stated that they are committed not to becoming involved with men who suffer from addictions to drugs or alcohol, as these substances played a key role in enhancing their ex-partners’ anger and in inducing violence. Holly explained her choice in the following manner:

Well, I'm a lot older than I was, and I've learned. Every time I go through something dramatic, I try to learn from the experiences and not repeat the same mistakes. And I've learned that anyone who is getting drunk on a steady basis is not the relationship type. They're already having an affair with alcohol.

The remaining participants described things that they know now they do *not* want to experience in a romantic relationship again. Two women noted that because they had grown so much since they left their violent partners, they knew better than to become involved with an abusive man again. Alana explained this in the following manner: "I feel like I grow through stages, phases. I feel anger, and how I wouldn't do that now." Similarly, Amber stated that her violent relationship of two years "taught me how not to live in terms of having a relationship."

Changed behaviors with subsequent romantic partners. Forty-eight women (38%) explained that their violent relationship inspired them to engage in novel, healthier behaviors with subsequent romantic partners. Most women described learning how to set and stick to firm limits with new partners, a task which they had not been able to accomplish with their violent partners. For a subset of women, setting limits meant absolutely not tolerating any form of physical abuse. Other women reported experiencing less chaos and fear in subsequent romantic relationships, which was concurrent with feeling more contentment.

Andrea, age 40, stated that an abusive relationship she'd had as a young adult helped her to set firm limits with her now ex-husband when he became physically violent with her for the first time. In contrast to the way she tolerated violence with her previous boyfriend, she exclaimed to him, "How dare you do that?" Andrea took her car keys,

drove to a friend's house, and initiated a divorce that day. She reported at the time of her interview that she is now happily remarried to a man that was not abusive.

Like Andrea, Zoey stated that when she married her current husband, she told him about her experience within a violent relationship and that she would not tolerate any hitting. Following her four-year violent relationship as a teen, Nancy held firm to her limits of not allowing abuse in subsequent dating relationships. Several years after her violent relationship ended, a man she was dating began to kick her foot under the table. When she realized he was not doing this as a joke, Nancy told him to leave her house and never return. Like Nancy, Kathy and Shawn concurred that they no longer tolerate violent behavior because they have learned to set healthier boundaries. Kathy explained, "It's also made me, like, not take as much shit from people. There's a line, and it's there."

Other participants have learned to see violent signs in subsequent partners and to leave them before the potential onset of violence. Lynda, age 23, stated that,

I get pretty spooked if I get into a relationship where I think someone will beat on me.

In fact, I broke up with someone because I thought he was too possessive. I could see the signs – I can see the signs in him I saw in my abuser.

Alisa stated that she also watches for signs of abuse in her current partner, as she is more aware now of how a partners' behavior can change suddenly, and what she needs to do to remain healthy and empowered. She noted,

Now in relationships, if anybody starts getting jealous about me hanging out with my friends, I will leave. I won't be isolated. Now I'm a lot more aware of it, but then I didn't really have that.

A few women explained that leaving their violent relationship has empowered them to remain strong, independent, and subsequently, firmer in their boundaries with men. Agnes stated that she gathered the courage to leave her abusive husband of 21 years when she met her current romantic partner, who helped her recover a sense of pride and self-worth. In her new relationship, Agnes has been committed to retaining a sense of pride and self-confidence when difficulties arise. She stated, “I have more of a backbone to stand up for myself now.” Joni, who survived an eight-year abusive relationship, noted that, “It did make me stronger, and did make me think. When this guy up here started being verbally abusive, I said, ‘This is it.’” Georgia exclaimed,

I’m an independent person now...I’ve developed into a different person and I don’t put up with, you know, remarks or abuse in that fashion anymore. In a way, it’s almost like I’ve become rebellious, somewhat. If an issue comes up, there’s times I’m just like really snotty. I’ll say, “I just don’t even want to go there. We’re not even going to discuss that.”...What I do is my business.

Not surprisingly, a subset of seven women (6%) explained that they would absolutely never tolerate physical abuse in any capacity again. Claudia stated that she learned “that I’ll never, ever stand for it again. You know...trying to keep a family together is not an excuse to put up with physical, or, well, not even physical – any kind of abuse.” Soleil, age 33, moved with her abusive husband to a European country where he was stationed for the military, where he proceeded to isolate her from other Americans. For Soleil, transitioning back to dating life was difficult. She explained that “it took me awhile to learn...I will not tolerate abuse.” Heather exclaimed more strongly, “I let an abusive person take total control of my life and that’s not something I’m ever going to let

happen again.” Katrina told her interviewer, “You know, we talked about whether or not I had limits to what kind of abuse I would take before...my tolerance to that now is zero.”

Fourteen women (11%) who felt they made healthier choices in men they picked as subsequent romantic partners explained that they currently experience less chaos, less fear, and more happiness in their romantic relationships. Miranda noted that trusting subsequent romantic partners in the aftermath of her nearly two-year violent relationship was difficult until very recently. She admitted, “I went through a period of time where I hated men. I wouldn’t look at men. It affected my relationships with men for awhile. Then I found the man of my dreams.” Ellie, age 21, explained, “What’s helpful now is getting on...having a relationship that is so different.” Similarly, Cassidy stated, “I’m married now, and in a really pretty healthy relationship. My whole life is very – my life is very different.” Hannah concurred that “I know that I’m safe and happy now, so that’s a good thing.” All of these women explained that being with a healthier romantic partner in the aftermath of a violent relationship helped them to feel more safe, trusting, and secure, and to trust that they would continue to make healthier choices in future relationships.

Some participants described feeling a sense of destiny about their violent relationship, as if it was “meant to be” because it paved the way for growth and positive change in subsequent romantic relationships. While reflecting on her violent relationship of nearly three years, Jennifer wondered,

Can I say it made me a stronger person? I don’t know what more I could have learned since I learned it with my father [who was physically and emotionally abusive]. I look at it as the first part of my life. If I hadn’t met [my ex-partner], I wouldn’t have met [my current partner]...this is the first relationship I can say that I love, and I think it’s a

healthy relationship for me.

On a similar note, Kari exclaimed,

I think that things happen for a reason. It was just kinda a stepping stone in my life.

There were certain things that I took away from that relationship that I needed to learn. I'm in a wonderful relationship right now with my husband.

Changes in relationships with family and friends. A third type of change within relationships described by participants (31%, $n = 39$) entailed the perception of strengthened ties with either friends or family members after their violent relationships ended. Many of these women reported feeling as if they had grown the most in terms of feeling more comfortable talking about their violent relationship and seeking social support from family and friends when needed. Previously, they had isolated themselves, or their partners had isolated them, from these social support networks.

Four percent of women ($n = 5$) explained that they now viewed their relationships with friends differently than they did during their violent relationship. Brooke stated that she felt her friendships were stronger now, as the support her friends provided during her year-long abusive relationship made her realize how lucky she was to have such understanding individuals in her life.

On the other hand, Beth noted that the friends she had at the time she was involved with an abusive boyfriend were relatively unhealthy people who did not support her resistance to the abuse. She stated that she had since befriended individuals who supported her independence and emergent healthy ideals. Similarly, Winona concurred that "I will now only be with friends who are supportive."

Seven percent of women ($n = 9$) noted positive changes in the way they related to family members in the aftermath of their violent relationship. Most women explained that these relationships had been strengthened either because family members offered them support during their violent relationships, or because they had come to value family more now since feeling unsupported by their violent former partners.

Kathy stated that her violent relationship “made me grateful for my family influence.” Danielle, who left her violent partner because she didn’t want her son to grow up in an abusive home, noted that she valued ties with her family of origin more because they provided her and her son with a strong extended support network that she saw at the time of her interview as crucial. Shawn reported that since her mother supported her through her violent relationship by visiting her and providing respite from her boyfriend, she felt closer to her than ever before. Similarly, Anna, whose father talked with her often in the middle of the night after particularly upsetting fights with her abusive boyfriend, stated that, “My dad helps a lot; we have become real close.”

Two other women noted that their relationships with their children improved after they left a violent partner. Pat explained that she is proud of herself because

I broke a cycle. I showed my kids, by staying...I showed them that I put up with that.

But I showed them that I was an adult and I showed them that I didn’t have to [stay and take the abuse].

By leaving her violent boyfriend, Pat felt that she had become a more positive role model for her children. Similarly, Beth has become motivated to empower her daughter to be assertive so that she does not become a victim of abuse in the future. Beth explained that

this practice with her daughter entails telling her that “God gave you a voice and you need to use it. People can’t know how you feel unless you tell them.”

One very courageous woman, Joely, explained that she actually loosened previously close ties with her brother in the aftermath of her violent marriage after he openly admitted to beating his wife. At the time of her interview, Joely viewed this changed relationship with her brother in a positive light because she associated her distance from him as a message that violence against women should not be condoned at any cost.

Eighty-eight percent of women who reported growth in non-romantic relationships in the aftermath of a violent relationship explained that they had learned since to ask for help from friends, family members, or therapists, or that they had become more open with disclosing details of their abuse to these individuals. One notable finding was that 78% of these women ($n = 31$) sought help or disclosed details of their abuse in the aftermath of a violent relationship in order to decrease associated feelings of shame and guilt. For these women, feelings of shame and guilt decreased gradually once they were able to talk about and extensively process their experience with supportive others, such as counselors or friends.

Joely stated that shame kept me “from getting help and seeking help” while she was in an abusive relationship. However, after her relationship ended, she explained,

I did seek help. I went to a licensed psychologist...I do whatever I can to be healthy and have a healthy relationship. Because I’m young, I know I’m going to have another relationship sometime, but I don’t want a bad one.

Joely explained that since she received psychological assistance, if she were to go back and change her actions during her violent relationship, “I would do it differently now. I would tell everybody.”

Like Joely, Karen’s shame was so profound that she avoided seeking help for emotional difficulties related to her violent relationship. However, eventually she began to attend group therapy as a way to decrease associated shame. Karen described this process in the following manner:

Shame, in a way – it sometimes – when it’s not at the critical point, it keeps you from getting help, but finally, eventually, it makes you get help, because you’re so far at the bottom.

Andrea admitted, “At the beginning, I was embarrassed and ashamed about it. As time goes on, I feel like I am telling it more to friends and letting the secret out.” Although she began attending counseling during the relationship, Andrea finally broke her silence with friends when she decided to go to a friend’s house for support after a vicious attack by her boyfriend. She reported,

I thought, “I have to talk to someone right now,” which was again a totally different response. She was a really good person to talk to. I used her phone to call my counselor and I got a restraining order against that man. It was like I had a support group of friends and they all helped me through that; it was wonderful. It felt good to have such a different response, like maybe I have grown a little bit.

On a similar note, Jennifer remarked that she

never told anyone...after, I told everybody. I learned...as a victim, you are not responsible; that talking is cathartic and releases shame. I told my cousins, my mom,

my sisters, and my friends. Now I don't have problems with telling anyone. Those little secrets is how it continues to happen.

Other women noted that guilt served as a motivator for help-seeking. Cami left her violent boyfriend when she was four months pregnant because she was afraid he would kill her or their unborn daughter. She explained that in the initial days after leaving him, she felt so guilty for the break-up that she sought counseling. Although she reported some lingering feelings of guilt at the time of her interview, Cami told her interviewer that she knew she did the right thing by leaving her boyfriend.

Sophia concurred, stating that during her violent high school relationship, guilt stopped me from seeking help from some people, like, if they had a lot of stuff going on in their life or whatever, then I would feel guilty dumping my problems on them.

But it's also made me want to [seek help] in a way.

After she ended her violent relationship, Sophia chose to go to therapy and to seek additional support from her mother, who worked as an advocate for survivors of IPV. At the time of her interview, Sophia stated that she no longer felt guilty asking for what she needed from family members.

Gina explained that after she stopped feeling that she was to blame for the abuse her high school boyfriend enacted against her, she became more willing to tell her story to a subsequent counselor. Gina noted, "It's easier to talk to someone else now [about the relationship] because I don't feel guilt anymore. Realizing the burden of guilt feels so much better; [it] really helps to get it out."

Shawn stated that her feelings of guilt related to having been in an abusive relationship "faded away when I finally sought help and started to talk to people."

Courtney concurred that guilt “has taught me when to talk about it...because if you don’t get it released it’s going to explode and that’s where a lot of anger comes out.” Rebecca explained that she learned to tell her story with pride a few months after her violent relationship ended because she

decided that “I’m going to have a voice, I’m not going to sit and protect this guy. I’m not going to slander him, but if somebody asks me, I’m not going to make up a story. I’m just going to say what is.”

Desire to help others. Thirty-one percent of women ($n = 39$) described an emergent desire to help abused women or their children in the aftermath of their violent relationship. This is consistent with the positive psychology virtue of using individual strengths to contribute positively to one’s community (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Desires to help others took the form of general aspirations, wishes to educate individuals about intimate partner violence on a social level, or specific acts undertaken on behalf of individuals within abusive relationships. Although some women expressed a selfless desire to help others in need because they felt they could empathize with women who experienced IPV, others reported that they hoped helping individuals in this situation might bring them renewed strength and empowerment.

Multiple participants described a general desire to help other individuals who have been impacted by intimate partner violence. During her interview, Charlene offered to talk to other female survivors of violent relationships in the event it might help them to make the decision to leave an abusive partner. Michelle stated, “I believe that...I can use this experience in some way maybe to help other people in the future.” Gina explained that she was always willing to tell her story if she feels someone would profit from

hearing about all the benefits she has incurred since she left her violent husband. In particular, Gina stated that she would like to help young people, whom she viewed as more vulnerable to abusive relationships. If she could, Gina noted, she would tell “every woman that is in a domestic situation [that she] has the power, is a survivor, and can leave and should leave.” Similarly, Kim noted that if she had the chance, she would tell women not to make the wrong decision of staying with a partner who treats them poorly.

Some participants noted that they felt helping other female survivors of IPV might empower them to continue to heal. Joely explained her desire to help other women in the following fashion:

I have great empathy for any woman who experiences any part of violence, whether it's physical violence, sexual violence, mental, verbal. I certainly would do whatever I can to help that person. Whatever I could do in my life to relieve just a little bit of hurt from somebody, I would be glad to do it, because it's a horrible thing to experience. It makes a lot of wounds and scars. I'm trying, even today, to heal from it.

Norma remarked, “I feel like giving back in some ways...[would] be cathartic.” Susan and Alex reported at the time of their interviews that they wanted to write a book that captured what it was like to survive an abusive relationship, as a way of making a difference in women's lives. Leslie concurred that she wanted to help other women make the decision to leave an abusive relationship because providing that type of validation to others might empower her to avoid becoming involved in another violent relationship.

Finally, a few women remarked that they had participated in the Domestic Violence Project as a specific means of helping other women. Melanie exclaimed,

I am grateful for the opportunity to have this [interview] on many levels; that it's

going to be used....I feel good about it. I don't feel the need to tell my story, but I'm grateful that it can be used.

Amy noted that she sought out the opportunity to be interviewed about her violent relationship because

I wanted to do whatever I could do so that it changes here. It has to change. Women are too afraid to do anything or say anything. The law enforcement makes us feel like we're crazy. They make us feel like it is our fault. The police department – on the reports, it looks like it's my fault.

Like Amy, some participants stated strong desires not only to help other female survivors of intimate partner violence, but to transform social systems or to educate individuals on a social level about the dangers of IPV. Many women expressed the thought that if women were more educated about the multiple ways that abuse can manifest and about healthy standards for relationships, they would be less susceptible to victimization.

For example, Diana stated, "Women need to know that it...can be violence, even if you are not hit." Shawn proclaimed, "Women should know that abuse is messed up in the head and they didn't cause it." Kate noted that she no longer keeps her abusive relationship a secret because

I don't want someone to ever go through what I did, ever, ever, ever....if I found a solution, I want it to be public. I want to be like, "Hey, this is how you can do it, this is how you can help, this is what you could do for you to be safe." I don't want them to go through what I am going through every day.

According to Susan, awareness is key to preventing and ending violence within relationships. She explained,

I believe everyone is on a journey and they are very unaware. I just hope this project can create better laws and bring awareness of consciousness to our society...I just hope it promotes hope, healing, and wholeness and respect for all.

Nancy hoped that the results of the Domestic Violence Project might inspire more awareness about violence within the educational system. She stated,

All I can say is that I would hope maybe some of this information could somehow trickle down through the educational system to, to help people. I think there should be some self-awareness classes in high school for everybody as to how your actions really will affect your tomorrow...I would have resisted it stronger, I think, if I had been just a little bit more education on how your decisions today do create your tomorrow.

A few women described novel life goals that emerged from their desire to help women on a greater social level. After her violent relationship ended, Trista expressed a desire to become a social worker who specialized in the treatment of survivors of domestic and sexual abuse. Sicily exclaimed, "I picked up stuff to go to law school here the other day. Somebody's got to be an advocate." For Abby, the aspiration of becoming a psychologist one day came out of wanting to help women in abusive relationships, because no one helped her. At the time of her interview, Cindy was working as a peer educator for teenagers, teaching them about healthy relationships. Cindy explained that she decided to help others rather than pursue counseling to process her own emotions in

the aftermath of her violent relationship, because she thought this type of social action would be ultimately more rewarding.

Finally, many women described specific acts in which they have engaged that indicated a strong desire to help other battered women and to prevent negative outcomes in other individuals' abusive relationships. Candace, who survived an abusive relationship of less than a year during high school, told her interviewer that now, she speaks up when she sees signs of abuse within her friends' relationships. Candace noted that if she can prevent any of her friends from undergoing what she experienced, she would consider such an intervention a success.

Like Candace, Agnes stated that since her abusive relationship ended, If somebody puts somebody else down, I will make a comment that, you know, to the fact that this isn't the way people should be treated, how would you like to be treated that way, put yourself on the receiving end of the remark...I've gotten a little more bold about the reactions that people expect to get from a comment to somebody...I'm bold enough to where I'll intervene and um, defend that person on the receiving end. I just don't feel that anybody should be treated like less of a person [than] they are.

A few participants explained that since they left their violent partners, they have attempted to intervene in family members' abusive relationships. Joanne explained that after she left her violent husband, her adult daughter became involved in an abusive relationship of her own. Rather than encourage her daughter to remain with her husband and tolerate the abuse, advice which her own mother once gave her, Joanne urged her daughter to leave him, assuring her that she deserved better.

Similarly, Kate's mother had been involved in an abusive relationship for years. Since Kate summoned the courage as a young adult to leave her abusive boyfriend, she has attempted to convince her mother to leave her violent partner as well. Kate noted,

I influence her to be free [from the influence of her abuser] because I don't want her to go through what I went through.

Changes in Self-Perception

Sixty-two percent of participants ($n = 79$) endorsed changes in self-perception in the aftermath of their violent relationships. Only eight of these women had also endorsed changes in self-perception during the process of stay-leave decision-making. Changes in self-perception that occurred after violent relationships ended included: 1) improved self-esteem, 2) enhanced feelings of strength and independence, 3) greater self-acceptance, or 4) changes in identity.

Of these 79 women, 59% ($n = 47$) described one specific type of change in self-perception, 27% ($n = 21$) described two changes in self-perception, 10% ($n = 8$) reported three types of changes, and 4% ($n = 3$) reported four types of changes. A clear pattern did not emerge in regards to specific outcomes reported by women who noted multiple changes in self-perception in the aftermath of their violent relationship. However, some women who described improvements in self-esteem also reported enhanced feelings of strength or independence, while a few others noted improvements in self-esteem coupled with greater self-acceptance.

Improved self-esteem. Twenty-one percent of women ($n = 27$) described improvements in self-esteem that occurred after they left a violent partner. Many of these women noted that they began to feel better about themselves when counselors, friends, or

family members helped to validate their self-worth, which their partners had effectively destroyed. Other women credited time and cognitive and emotional processing that occurred independent of a positive support network with associated improvements in self-esteem. Not surprisingly, as women's experiences of shame and guilt decreased, their self-esteem tended to increase. Like participants who experienced positive changes in self-perception while they were *still in* a violent relationship, women who reported this type of growth after leaving a violent partner described changes in self-perception that included the realization that the abuse was not their fault, and that they deserved to be treated better.

Chandra, Molly, Charlene, Miranda, and Courtney credited their counselors with helping them to renew their self-esteem in the aftermath of their violent relationships, as did several other women. Chandra explained that although she had sought counseling during her violent relationship, it was not helpful at the time. After this relationship ended, however, she found a counselor who was supportive and who used dream analysis as part of their work together. Chandra noted that she perceived therapy to be successful at that time because it incorporated the important cultural and spiritual element of dream interpretation in addition to work on improving her self-esteem. Chandra stated that through her counselor she learned that she was in charge of her own life, and that as long as she retained her self-respect, she would be less vulnerable to subsequent violent relationships. She noted that this knowledge inspired her to act differently in subsequent romantic relationships.

Like Chandra, Charlene acknowledged that her "counselor was the best thing that ever happened to me," in that she helped her to realize she was a good person and had a

lot to offer in relationships. After discerning through counseling that she “wasn’t crazy,” Charlene stated, “As far as myself, I’ve grown in a million different directions.”

Courtney, who was suicidal after her violent relationship ended, concurred that “I needed to hear from positive people that I was better than what I was led to be[lieve].” Courtney explained that her counselor showed her another side of herself: a positive, strong, and empowered side. As she learned more about the cycle of violence through counseling, Courtney realized she deserved to be treated with more respect from subsequent romantic partners.

Molly’s mother had stopped talking to her when she was 17 years old. Depressed and confused, Molly, a Native American woman, became involved with an abusive boyfriend for the next six months. When she became pregnant, Molly left her violent boyfriend in order to provide her daughter with a better life. After ending the relationship, she sought counseling to help her process these extreme life changes. Molly explained, “I got self-worth and love through that therapeutic relationship.” Molly noted that her counselor’s support helped her to realize that she would be alright on her own. Miranda concurred that counseling “built my self-esteem, ‘cause when I left, I just thought I was shit. I thought I deserved it.”

A few women explained that they sought therapy as a way of decreasing residual shame associated with their choice to remain in a violent relationship for as long as they did. Melanie, who attended group therapy after her violent relationship ended, explained that sharing her shame “opened me up to feeling better about myself.” Seeing other women who had experienced a similar amount of shame and how this negative emotion had inhibited their decisions helped Melanie to see that she wasn’t alone, that she could

learn from their mistakes, and that she could make healthier choices in the future.

Similarly, Georgia noted that since she attended a court-ordered rehabilitation program in the aftermath of her violent relationship, her related feelings of shame and guilt have largely dissipated. As such, she has cultivated a sense of pride and greater self-worth. Georgia stated,

I like who I am today. I feel like a lot of the shame is gone. I can talk with a total stranger on the street...I could go back home and see people and still feel good about myself, as opposed to when I first left and had all that shame and guilt.

Five percent of women ($n = 6$) explained that the supportive presence of friends and/or family members instigated enhanced feelings of self-confidence in the aftermath of their violent relationships. Through the support of her friends, Michelle began to realize that she deserved to be treated better in romantic relationships, although learning to believe in herself took a great deal of time. Jacinda explained that a friend she met at a battered women's shelter helped her to realize that it was worthwhile to fight for her needs to get met in the future, despite feelings of guilt that her marriage did not last. Since this time, Jacinda has learned to feel better about herself "because I now truly believe that he's no better than I am." Similarly, the support of Emmy's grandmother in the aftermath of her violent relationship helped her to realize she deserved to be treated better in a relationship, and that she would be alright on her own.

Six percent of women ($n = 7$) credited *themselves* with the growth they experienced in the realm of self-perception after leaving a violent partner. These seven women either did not seek informal or professional help or did seek such help but did not feel as if the assistance they received was supportive. Rather, these participants noted that

over time and through a gradual examination of their motives, patterns, and actions, they began to blame themselves less and respect themselves more.

Prior to her abusive relationship, Heather never felt worthy of positive attention. Her violent relationship only reinforced these feelings of perceived worthlessness. However, over time, as Heather struggled to understand why she was involved in this relationship through self-reflection and journaling, she came to view the situation very differently. Heather noted that at the time of her interview, she felt a greater sense of self-worth and didn't think she would ever allow herself to be treated that poorly again. Wanda, age 55, survived a five-year violent marriage to a man who was also extremely emotionally abusive. Wanda credited her currently healthier lifestyle with "caring more about myself; 'cause I don't believe he could have kept me in that relationship as long as he did, as long as we were in it, if I hadn't had some really bad issues with my self-esteem."

Amanda, age 21, kept her violent relationship of five years hidden from friends and family members due to a deep sense of shame. However, her shame was so intense that it motivated her to "work hard to build [my]self up and have self-confidence, [in order to] have people think highly of me." Similarly, Norma wanted to prove to herself that she could live alone in the aftermath of her violent relationship, which she did while completing a master's thesis. She stated that during this time, she learned to respect herself more and to feel less ashamed about her experience within a violent relationship.

Enhanced feelings of strength and independence. Twenty percent of women ($n = 26$) described increased feelings of strength in the aftermath of their violent relationships. Women who described feeling stronger after surviving these extraordinarily

difficult circumstances tended to feel that the experience forced them to grow in previously unimaginable ways.

Britney, age 25, learned after surviving a six-month violent relationship that “I can live through a lot of things...I’m very resourceful.” Michelle explained, “[I feel] like I’m at the point in my life right now that I’ve learned from my experience and I’m a stronger person because of that.” Kayla concurred,

I think it made me a stronger person, because I know what I can take. I know the level of emotional abuse, physical abuse, and just general bull that I can take, and still come out intact. Although it was a very twisted way to go about it, it gave me a self-realization that I am a very strong person.

The strength Alison gained from surviving and ultimately leaving an abusive relationship was something she noted that she will always carry with her. Alison stated,

That whole journey moving out of it was, well, a life-changing event for me. It helped me to see how strong a woman I was...I never had an opportunity to be on my own...It built up confidence knowing I could survive something like that...Something I firmly believe is what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

Like Alison, Staci experienced her violent relationship as life-changing in many ways.

Staci explained of her long road to recovery,

It really changed a lot of things about me...when I first left my relationship, I was bitter. I was resentful towards any man...It took me a long time to enter into a relationship. And then I did enter a relationship and it was disastrous...I was dysfunctional, to put it nicely. But I think that after discovering what lessons I had to learn, I have become a stronger person.

A few women additionally stated that they have been pleasantly surprised by the positive effects their violent relationship has inspired. Diana explained,

You know kind of how bad things can make a good thing happen? I'm so thankful that I have the counseling I have now. You know, because I think I'm...stronger than I have ever been in my life.

While reflecting on her violent relationship, Danielle stated, "It's taught me that I got through that, [so] I can get through anything. And it really has built me up a great deal and I'm surprised the positive aspects that have come out of it." Gina, like several other women, told her interviewer that she identifies herself now as a survivor rather than a victim. Gina explained that she chose to grow and change her life as a result of her experiences within a violent relationship, as opposed to her ex-partner, whom she felt has remained stagnant. Gina exclaimed, "I am a survivor...I would never go back to it because as I was growing, (her ex-partner) is still where I left him."

Eleven percent of women ($n = 14$) reported that they have gained *an enhanced sense of independence* since leaving a violent partner. While some women described a sense of relief that they were no longer financially dependent upon a violent partner, others exclaimed that they enjoyed the newfound freedom to pursue individual interests. A common experience was one mentioned by Norma, who reported that after her violent relationship ended, "I did all of these things that I feel like built up my self-esteem, and I was doing it by myself. You know, I was making it happen and making my own decisions, and just really enjoying that."

Many women explained that in order to cultivate a sense of independence in the aftermath of a violent relationship, they purposely stayed out of romantic relationships

until they felt more empowered and less vulnerable to becoming dependent. Although Chloe was involved with her abusive boyfriend for less than a year, she made a decision in the aftermath of her violent relationship to avoid dating until she could regain a sense of strength and prove to herself that she would be alright alone. Chloe explained,

There was a long time where I really had to stay away from especially certain men – just men – most men in general, just so that I wouldn’t become unhealthy again right away...so then I was focused not only on being alone, because I think that’s what the major focus was, was being alone, and then that helped me focused more on what – myself – what I can do. It made me feel stronger alone than I would be as a pair...I wasn’t one of those people that would go and just sit alone. And now, I can do that.

Like Chloe, Katrina has realized, “I don’t need him or any man to be in my life, you know. I am capable of being happy by myself.” Emily concurred that

I have been lonely most of my life. Ever since then, you know, I’ve had relationships, but they never really lasted, and um, I’ve spent a large portion of my life alone, and it’s only like in the last year or so that I’ve come to the decision that I’m just going to enjoy being alone. I’m just not gonna fight it anymore, and I don’t mind anymore... I don’t even care anymore because I have good friends, I have animals...I have little people that love me, I have old people that love me, and so that man/woman thing may happen - it may not happen, but...it doesn’t matter anymore.

Greater self-acceptance. Twenty-two percent of women ($n = 28$) explained that after leaving a violent partner, they embarked upon a journey that has culminated in greater self-acceptance. Participants reported greater self-acceptance upon realizing that the abuse was not their fault and subsequently deciding to forgive themselves for their

choice to remain in an abusive relationship for as long as they did. Almost all of these women noted that as associated guilt or shame decreased, so did their feelings of responsibility for the abuse.

Joely explained that as her guilt decreased, so did her attributions that she was responsible for the failure of her marriage. She admitted,

I had guilt when I left. I thought, “I’m not woman enough to keep my marriage together.” But then I started growing and maturing – I have absolutely no guilt from that relationship. I did the best I could do with what I had to work with, and, uh, I just chose the wrong partner.

Katrina echoed Joely’s sentiments with a similar realization. Katrina explained that despite feelings of guilt that she wasn’t “smart enough to get out sooner,” she understood eventually that it was unfair to blame herself for the failure of the relationship. Katrina stated, “I didn’t do it, you know; it was his – his problem, not mine.”

Through counseling, Claudia learned that the guilt she suffered as a result of childhood abuse and a long history of violent romantic relationships “came from places inside me that were misguided beliefs that...I was somehow responsible.” Since Claudia realized that these violent relationships were not her fault, she reported feeling stronger than she has ever been in her life.

Susan, who experienced tremendous guilt while living in an extreme religious sect during an abusive marriage of twenty years, took a more radical view when discussing the guilt that women feel in the aftermath of violent relationships. Susan explained that now,

Guilt is not even a word in my vocabulary. I don’t even acknowledge it as a word. It is

something society creates and projects to make someone feel fearful or wrong, and I don't believe there is any such thing.

Other women described shame as the emotion that influenced them to feel as if the violent relationship was their fault. Emmy explained that in the beginning of her violent relationship, she felt a lot of shame because she couldn't figure out what she was doing to invite abuse from her boyfriend. Through the support of her grandmother, Emmy realized that the abuse was not her fault. She stated, "I started thinking clearly and independently, and eventually I didn't have shame anymore." Similarly, Jordan exclaimed, "I was ashamed of myself for not getting out...thinking that I had actually caused him to do it. I would blame myself for it. I know now that wasn't my fault."

Gina, who moved out of the town where she and her violent partner had lived together, was ashamed to return home for a long time because she felt that people there blamed her for the abuse. However, Gina noticed that as her shame decreased, she became more accepting of herself, and individuals in her hometown became more accepting of her.

Lindsey, age 50, survived an abusive marriage of 15 years. Lindsey admitted that she still suffered bouts of shame when thinking back to how long she had stayed with her violent husband and when she thought about the violence her children were exposed to when they were together. However, through counseling, Lindsey eventually stopped blaming herself for the dissolution of her marriage. Since she left her husband, she reported taking more risks to assert herself. She explained,

I feel a lot less ashamed of talking about what has happened to me than ever before because I used to be criticized and told to be quiet when I would start talking about

these things. So it has been really powerful for me to realize that when people attack me, as in my ex-husband and maybe other people, I didn't cause that, so there is no reason to feel shame for that.

Like Lindsey, Sicily admitted that "I'll feel shame for having ever been involved with [her ex-partner], but I try not to let that overpower me too much. I'm a lot easier on myself than I used to be."

Other women discussed their greater self-acceptance in terms of decreased self-blame rather than associating their growth with a decrease in shame or guilt. Darlene explained that her counselor "really helped me see that this wasn't all my fault, and I wasn't this horrible person...that I wasn't worthless and that there would be somebody that would love me for who I am." Similarly, Katrina stated,

I've learned a lot about myself in the counseling, you know, mostly in the...stuff that he did wasn't my fault, and I can't, I can't be responsible for it. You know, that even if I were to say something mouthy to him, it did not given him the right to hit me.

Belinda, age 41, stated that her violent boyfriend was so emotionally abusive to her that he made her question her self-worth and her actions within the relationship. As a result, Belinda noted, she felt as if the abuse was her fault. Belinda admitted, "After you hear that for so long, you feel that it is your fault. You feel like you're the one that has the problem. Now I can hardly believe it."

Changes in identity. Five percent of participants ($n = 6$) stated that being in a violent relationship led to a fundamental change in their identity. For some, surviving a violent relationship forced them out of innocence and into a very real adult world. Other women felt that the relationship was so impactful that it changed the core of their being.

Kathy's violent relationship in her last year of high school taught her a lot about relationships, while positively reinforcing previously buried feelings of strength. Kathy explained that her "relationship was like, probably where I lost my innocence... That was, I don't know, that was definitely a major point in growing up."

Sonja, age 46, was involved in a sexually violent relationship for a year and a half. Although the relationship occurred in her early 40's, her experience was so devastating that she felt it had an "enormous, enormous influence, as far as, um feeling like I grew up." Since she left her abusive boyfriend, Sonja has remained single in an attempt to make herself less accessible to violent men. Instead, she planned to focus on returning to school and securing a college degree. Sonja stated eagerly, "I'm doing what usually people do in their early 20's, and I'm 46."

Sicily explained that although she continued to struggle with trying to understand why she allowed her abusive boyfriend to remain in her life for four years, and why God wanted her to undergo that experience, her violent relationship nonetheless shaped a large part of her identity. Sicily noted,

This past relationship does not define me, [but] it makes me who I am today. It doesn't define me, but it is part of my definition of who I am. It helps to define all of these experiences [I have had since].

Similarly, Lauren grew up in a violent home and had a series of abusive relationships in early adulthood. However, her last abusive relationship in high school left her feeling so miserable and ashamed that it "made me strive for bettering myself." At the time of her interview, Lauren described her violent relationship as "my jumping off spot

of being me,” as her ex-boyfriend’s attempts to control her actions had made her strive to be more independent and to rebuild her shattered confidence.

Changes in Cognitive Appraisal of Violent Relationship

Sixty-one percent of women ($n = 77$) reported changes in the way they cognitively appraised a violent relationship after it ended. Changes in cognitive appraisal of a violent relationship included: 1) becoming more aware of the abusive dynamics within the relationship, 2) attributing meaning to the relationship by viewing it as a positive learning experience, and 3) acceptance and integration of the experience.

Of these 77 women, 62% ($n = 48$), described one type of change in the way they appraised their violent relationship, 27% ($n = 21$) described two different types of changes, and 11% ($n = 8$) denoted three types of changes. No clear combination of themes within this category emerged for women who described two different types of changes in the way they appraised their violent relationship. Thirty percent ($n = 23$) of the women who described growth in the way they cognitively appraised their violent relationship had also described positive changes in this form of appraisal during the process of stay-leave decision-making.

Greater awareness of abuse dynamics. Thirty-three percent of participants ($n = 42$) described various pathways through which they had gained insight into the dynamics of their abusive relationship since leaving a violent partner. For some women, growth in the aftermath of a violent relationship entailed getting out of denial by recognizing that the relationship was, indeed, abusive. Other women reported that they had grown because they were now more aware of telltale signs of abuse and how the cycle of violence was perpetuated. Still other participants noted that they became aware

of, and/or had taken greater responsibility for, their own actions within the violent relationship which may have contributed to the unhealthy dynamic.

Labeling the relationship as abusive. Six percent of women ($n = 17$) stated that since their abusive relationship ended, they had begun to label either the relationship as violent, or their partner's actions as abusive. Previously, these participants did not label the relationship as violent because they were largely in denial about the severity of the abuse. Women who had this experience tended to come from violent families of origin where physical and emotional abuse was considered normative.

Wendy's parents were both alcoholics, and domestic violence was common in her home. When Wendy's high school boyfriend began to physically abuse her, she didn't tell anyone because she was embarrassed to admit that she had gotten herself into a relationship similar to that of her parents. Wendy noted that she never thought to label her own relationship as abusive until a counselor helped her to realize the parallels between the two relationships. Once she realized the parallels between her parents' relationship and her violent relationship, she was inspired to seek ways to sever ties with her ex-partner.

Jennifer's experience in her family of origin was similar to Wendy's. Jennifer explained in her interview, "Coming from a long line of abusive alcoholics, [it was] hard to admit I was in that relationship. I thought I was smarter than that, and I couldn't admit it 'til it was over."

Paula described her abusive relationship as "really ridiculous as I look back on it." Paula explained that she, like Wendy and Jennifer, had suffered abuse and witnessed domestic violence between her parents as a child, and that she unconsciously chose a

husband who was much like her father. Paula stated that after she left her husband and worked through her tremendous guilt about the failure of the relationship, “you’re easier on yourself, because you realize when you are in the situation you can’t see it.”

Mickey explained that she grew up in a household where her mother obliged her father in every way. When she married her husband of 21 years, Mickey fell into similar patterns, eventually blaming herself for the abuse he inflicted upon her. As time passed, Mickey began to realize that her ex-husband’s actions were abusive. She stated, “It [the signs of abuse] was not as visible at first. In hindsight, I see it was always there.”

Joan left her abusive husband of four years because she could no longer tolerate the way he manipulated her. Joan explained, “I suppose through the years you don’t want to see things. Now that I look back on it, it’s like, ‘Oh my God. Why did I stick it out so long?’” Joan reported that subsequently, she plans to “keep my eyes open, quit using my heart so much and use my head” when choosing another romantic partner.

Similarly, Donna was married for 20 years to an alcoholic who was emotionally and physically abusive. She explained that her ex-husband treated her similar to the way her mother had treated her father. Since she gathered the courage to leave her husband, Donna has realized she was in particular denial about the severity of the emotional abuse she suffered. In subsequent interactions with her ex-husband that involve their children, Donna explained that she no longer allows him to control her as he once did. She stated, “I [now] have the ability to look at things straight on and see the reality.”

Michelle did not come from an abusive family of origin, but she nonetheless became involved with a violent boyfriend while in high school. Michelle noted, “Because of the way he treated me, I thought that maybe there was something wrong with me. I

never really thought it was him, until later on.” Michelle explained that her current boyfriend was the one who helped her to realize that her previous relationship was abusive. Now that she understands how she deserves to be treated in a romantic relationship, Michelle stated that she doesn’t think she will become involved in another violent relationship again.

Learning about the specific dynamics of abuse. Twenty-eight percent of women ($n = 36$) stated that since their violent relationship ended, they had learned more about the cycle of violence and “typical” patterns of behavior found in violent individuals. The great majority of these women learned about the dynamics of IPV through some form of psychoeducation in the aftermath of their violent relationships, either provided in counseling, at shelters, or by friends or family members. Many participants stated that this knowledge had empowered them to remain cautious and assertive in subsequent romantic relationships and to speak up for friends who were in abusive relationships.

Multiple women explained that they had learned about the cycle of violence and patterns common to abusive individuals through a counselor. These participants stated that this knowledge had helped to improve their self-care and/or to influence their choice of subsequent romantic partners. After Gina left her abusive partner, she sought counseling to help her try to understand why she had gotten involved in a violent relationship. Through counseling, Gina “began to understand what domestic abuse was about.” Soon after gaining this knowledge, she left her violent partner because she realized she deserved to be treated better.

Similarly, Molly stated that counseling in the aftermath of her violent relationship “helped me recognize what was normal and what was not okay or normal, because I

obviously just didn't know." Courtney echoed this sentiment: "Just recently I learned other signs of abuse, too...but in the past, I never knew the cycles, and now I know what you have to shoot for in the long haul." This information empowered both women to leave their violent partners, and to aspire to be treated better in future relationships.

Leslie stated that her counselor helped her to gain new insight into why some partners engage in emotional abuse. She noted that she knew better by the time of her interview than to become involved in another abusive relationship. Leslie explained that if she did find herself unintentionally within a similar situation again, she would not allow herself to internalize her partner's attempts to make her feel worthless this time. Instead, Leslie admitted, she would seek help, stand up for herself, and not allow herself to be physically harmed.

Similarly, in counseling sessions she sought in the aftermath of her violent relationship, Wendy made a list of what to look for in a romantic partner that might constitute warning signs indicative of abusive behavior. Wendy exclaimed, "I think [counseling] enlightened me a lot about relationships – just what kinds of things to watch out for. [This is the] only violent relationship I've been in, thank goodness."

Several other participants stated that they learned to appraise their violent relationship differently after leaving an abusive partner *without* the assistance of counselors or other supportive individuals. Cami explained, "It wasn't until I left that I started gaining knowledge about what it all was about." Cami did not elaborate on how she learned this important life lesson, but she did state that "I think [my relationship] has pushed me to grow, which is good. It's taught me the danger of domestic violence and how serious it is." Heather stated of her violent relationship,

In the end it's had a very positive influence, because it's given me a better understanding of what a lot of women and some men go through...it's given me knowledge and it's given me understanding.

Emmy, Kari, Wendy, Claudia, and Sarah all explained that at the time of their interviews, they were aware of some telltale signs of abuse that would prevent them from remaining with a violent partner in the future. Sarah explained to her interviewer that only in retrospect did she see telltale signs of abuse within her abusive relationship. She noted that she came to this realization independently, and that things likely would have been different in that relationship if she had been more educated about the dynamics of abusive relationships.

After Claudia broke up with her violent partner, she realized that the act of ending this relationship constituted a form of "breaking the cycle" of abuse she had endured since childhood. Claudia reported that her decision to break the cycle of violence has had positive implications for her life. Claudia stated of her relationship,

I think it helped me grow and be able to see the signs. And you know, that I'm better than that, and that I don't deserve that kind of treatment, and that I'll never, ever stand for it again.

Similarly, once Emmy learned from her grandmother some telltale signs of violent partners, she avoided becoming involved with any subsequent abusive men.

A few women noted that in their spare time, they had researched IPV and its effects in order to understand why they became involved in an abusive relationship. Joely reported that since she left her violent partner, "I have read books. I am just like a sponge." Joely stated that because of this knowledge, "I do whatever I can to be healthy

and have healthy relationships.” Susan, who planned to write a book about her experience, concurred that “a lot of time is spent researching this topic and writing about it,” so that she could continue to learn about the dynamics that often occur in abusive relationships and help others avoid making the same choices as she did.

Other women endorsed strong feelings of wanting to share what they have learned about the dynamics of a violent relationship in order to help others who are in similar relationships. Agnes stated that she learned from her violent partner that even the slightest form of emotional abuse can be extremely harmful. She explained,

You don’t belittle someone, you don’t tell a joke at someone else’s expense. I mean, you don’t even laugh. To humiliate somebody else so you can get a laugh, you don’t, I guess I’ve learned from being in that position how people don’t want to be treated.

Agnes stated that subsequently, “if somebody puts somebody else down...[I will] “defend the person on the receiving end.” Like Agnes, Candace stated that she had become more apt to notice abuse within her friends’ relationships. As a result, she noted that she had engaged in various acts to help these individuals in any way she can.

Awareness of personal contributions to unhealthy relationship dynamics. Twenty percent of women ($n = 25$) described an emergent awareness of how their own personality traits or abuse history may have added to or perpetuated the unhealthy dynamics in their violent relationships. This insight came about after women intentionally sought out therapy or read self-help books in the aftermath of a violent relationship in order to understand either why they were drawn to a violent partner initially, or how they became stuck in a cycle of violence within that relationship. Women who underwent this intense form of self-examination reported that an improved awareness about their

tendencies to engage in particular types of relational patterns had helped them to make healthier choices in subsequent romantic relationships.

Heather explained that her violent relationship was characterized by “this strange pull” that “is so difficult to break.” Near the end of her violent relationship, she was suicidal and in a counseling relationship that she viewed as unhelpful. However, Heather stated,

Now I feel like I’m in a lot better spot psychologically...I really understand more my motivations and why I do things and pretty much why I respond to things and...now it just disgusts me...to the point that I know I won’t ever be in that sort of place again.

Heather stated that time has helped her to integrate her experience, and that her relationship has “had the influence of showing me what it can be, what I don’t want in my life andthe things that I can look forward to staying away from that.”

Beth also described the development of gradual insight into her own behavior as a result of a spiritual quest she has embarked upon in the aftermath of her violent relationship. Beth reported at the time of her interview that she was reading a self-help book about women who love too much, which had helped her to see how her own behavior contributed to the unhealthy dynamics within her abusive relationship. However, she noted that it had been difficult to become aware of these personal issues because it had forced her to accept how her actions may have perpetuated the violence against her. Similarly, Leslie expressed a desire to understand why she became involved in an abusive relationship. She explained that her experience in Alcoholics Anonymous inspired her to recognize the ways she had hurt others unintentionally, including her ex-partner, and to make amends for her own contributions to their relationship.

Rebecca stated that her violent relationship made me take a look at myself...I don't want to be abused. I never wanted to be abused or mistreated...I think I just have the ability to attract people who are hurting. I think they see some kind of strength in me and get more and more dependent on me, and then I get claustrophobic.

Rebecca reported that she used this knowledge to set clearer boundaries with subsequent romantic partners. She stated that after much introspection and many relationships that began because she tried to "save" men from their suffering, she had come to respect her intuition, sensitivity, and drive to help others while recognizing that their pain did not give them the right to abuse anyone.

Wendy explained that her experience in counseling "brought up habitual relationships I get into," which had helped her to figure out what telltale signs to watch out for in future romantic partners. Callie noted that her violent relationship "showed me how dependent I can be on people. And I don't like that, and I wouldn't do it again."

Amber was inspired to pursue counseling as a result of the intense shame she felt in the aftermath of her violent relationship. Amber explained, "I knew I had to get over that emotional feeling of shame in order to work on some of my personal issues that caused me to get into this in the first place." Sorelle, age 21, concurred that counseling was helpful because it helped her to realize why she became involved with a sexually abusive boyfriend. Like Amber, Sorelle sought out help initially in order to decrease intense feelings of shame. Now that her shame had greatly decreased, Sorelle stated that she had become inspired to help other women who have undergone similar experiences.

Nine percent of women ($n = 11$) reported that an emergent awareness of how they contributed to the unhealthy dynamics in their abusive relationships had helped them to take subsequent responsibility for acts they engaged in during these relationships. Chloe explained that since her violent relationship ended over three years ago,

I feel kind of recovered. Because, like, I feel also that even though I was in a sick relationship or I was involved in sick relationships, a lot of that had to do with me being sick...So I take a lot of responsibility for that.

Rachel concurred that “today I am willing to take responsibility and own up to my part,” which included consenting to sexual acts she was uncomfortable with during her relationship and drinking heavily to cope with the abuse both during and after the relationship. As a result of her drinking problem, Rachel’s violent husband was able to secure custody of their children, who remained in his care at the time of her interview.

Darlene explained that taking responsibility for her own actions within an abusive marriage did not constitute an act of excusing her ex-husband’s actions. She stated, “I certainly don’t believe that I deserved to be treated that way or that I asked for it, but at the same time, I do take a level of responsibility for it happening.”

Karen reported that she had become abusive towards her husband in retaliation for his violence towards her. She left him eventually because she came to perceive herself as a mean person, which made her very uncomfortable. Karen noted that “though (her ex-husband) had his faults, I know that there was some things *I’ve* done that caused me to lose something that meant so much to me, and that was our marriage.”

Leila, a 27 year-old woman who survived a three-year abusive relationship, stated that since that relationship ended, she had become more willing to take responsibility for her part in it. She explained,

I think there's a real danger in looking at women as victims in abusive relationships.

As much as we think its empowering, its disempowering to women. Two adults in a relationship need to take mutual responsibility for the positive and the negative.

Deriving meaning from the relationship. Twenty percent of participants ($n = 26$) reported that being in a violent relationship had taught them some valuable life lessons. The majority of women noted that although they used to categorize their experience in an abusive relationship as primarily negative, they felt now that their suffering was worthwhile because it instigated growth and positive change in their lives. Many women noted that as their negative emotions about a violent relationship decreased, they were more able to positively reappraise the experience, view it with a sense of humor, and interpret it as a meaningful learning experience.

Fifteen percent of women ($n = 19$) noted that their lives have improved since they began to think about their violent relationship as a positive learning experience rather than as a negative life experience. For some women, the road to positive reappraisal of a violent relationship has been long and arduous. For example, Charlene's violent relationship began when she was 18 years old, but it took her over twenty years to come to peace with the experience and all the chaos and heartache that followed. Charlene explained that her life

went to hell after the relationship. It took me from 24-29 before I almost killed myself, without knowing it, drinking to the point of excess. [It was] really difficult to pull my

head out of my butt, but I finally got it at 40... It took a long time to twist all that nightmare stuff into something that was productive for me.

Melanie reported that she continued to struggle with integrating all she had learned from her violent relationship of eight years. Although several years had passed since the relationship ended, Melanie noted that “I don’t feel completely done with it. I feel like the abusive stuff...I feel like a lot of it is still inside of me...It’s not completed yet.” However, Melanie stated, “I feel I’ve learned a tremendous amount. I’d like to have learned it another way, but it could have been worse.” Melanie explained that she tried to view the experience in a positive light because “victimization is like a poison if you keep it too long and don’t grow with it.”

Like Melanie, Cami explained when asked how her violent relationship impacted her life that “I think it’s pushed me to grow, which is good...as much struggle as it is, it’s a good thing.” Cami elaborated by stating, “I probably wouldn’t take it back if I could. I have two beautiful children and I’ve grown up a lot.” Isabella reported that her violent relationship influenced her in a similar fashion. She stated that in the aftermath of this relationship, “I’ve tried to make the best of it, because it’s something I’ll never put myself through again; I’ll tell you that. I’ve really grown a lot since it’s happened.”

Alex realized that “many wonderful things have happened out of a lot of devastation and sadness.” Alex explained that she grew tremendously after seeking counseling to cope with her emotions and understand her motivations in the aftermath of her violent relationship. She noted that she now felt stronger, she was able to forgive her ex-partner and herself for their actions within the relationship, and she wanted to help others who have experienced IPV in any way that she could.

Four percent of women ($n = 5$) stated specifically that their violent relationship had taught them some important life lessons. Both Lorna and Kristen explained that they learned more about themselves. Charlene noted that she learned how to assert herself, the ways she could be vulnerable within relationships, that she was a good person and not at fault for the violence, to help others, to feel hopeful about the future, and not to have any regrets about the experience.

Jacinda explained that recently, she thanked her counselor for all she had taught her through the recovery process. Her therapist's response was the following:

She told me – she said, basically, she hadn't done a whole lot. She said she, um, has enjoyed watching me. She referred to it as watching the flower grow and bloom.

About all she did was every once in awhile uncurl a leaf or give me some fertilizer.

The best thing about her was the fact that she didn't give me the answers, but she gave me the tools and the skills to find my own.

Five percent of women ($n = 6$) explained that they have tried to have a sense of humor about their experience in a violent relationship because it helped them to cope. Sonja stated that she often made jokes to explain why she decided to pursue her college degree as a 46 year-old woman. She exclaimed, "I would cover this enormous pain with humor...I would tell people, well, if you dated [my ex-partner], you'd be going to school, too." Similarly, Susan noted, "I try to get some sense of humor out of it." Hannah stated,

It was such a long time ago, and I just try to laugh about it now, because, it's like, you know – it was only 9 months, and you know, granted, he did some pretty nasty things to me, but you know, I'm alive to tell about it.

Acceptance and integration of trauma experience. Twenty percent of participants reported that they had either accepted and integrated their violent relationship as part of a larger, cohesive life narrative ($n = 16$), or that they were in the process of trying to accept and integrate this experience in order to move on with their lives ($n = 8$). Both groups of women noted that talking about the experience with supportive individuals had facilitated acceptance and understanding.

The eight women who reported struggling with the integration and acceptance of their violent relationships all nonetheless sought support from counselors or individuals trained to talk about IPV in the aftermath of these relationships. Karen stated that she initiated a divorce against her violent husband because she knew if she didn't, he would likely kill her. Since she left him, Karen had been seeing a counselor, who had helped her to feel less isolated and to build stronger coping skills. Despite this support, Karen continued to struggle with missing her husband. Karen stated,

I still love him, but I know he's no good for me. I've accepted that – it was hard to accept, but it's over....I know it's a good thing I'm not with him, but I miss being loved.

Alex received counseling both during and after her violent relationship, although she felt it was most helpful after she left her abusive partner. She explained, "The biggest help for me is just talking about it all...and [to] learn tools to deal with my feelings." Through counseling, Alex noted, "I'm starting to learn about the shame now, and I'm starting to learn about what I tucked away and wasn't dealing with...but I'm finding out it doesn't work so quick." Alex explained that she felt she had not yet fully processed the experience of having survived in a violent relationship, but that she was hopeful this

would happen someday. Similar to Alex, Kristen had been trying to make sense of her violent relationship with a counselor, but she felt that her ongoing shame had inhibited this process to some degree.

Lindsey explained that counseling had facilitated growth in her life because

It helps to talk about it and it helps to hone it down, to get my life more in perspective, because I have a lot of memories that I wish I didn't have, and it makes me come unglued a little bit, and that affects my daily functioning. It's really important for people to talk about these experiences.

Rachel, who did not pursue counseling in the aftermath of her violent relationship, explained that she was struggling because a part of her missed her violent partner. In spite of this struggle, Rachel stated to her interviewer that the interview itself had motivated her to work harder to let go of her violent relationship so that she could move on with her life. Rachel noted,

Well, I have made the decision while being here - it's time to move on. To not give that power to that relationship anymore, to accept that it is over, and to concentrate on what I need to do for me, and to work at having a meaningful, strong, loving relationship with the kids.

The remainder of women felt that they had completed the process of integration of their trauma into a cohesive life narrative, either with the assistance of counselors, friends, or God. Jessica, a religious woman, stated that she used to be ashamed because she wasn't angrier at herself for staying with her abusive boyfriend as long as she did. Jessica stated to her interviewer that now "it is just something that happened. I can't change that, so why be ashamed of it?"

Jacinda exclaimed that once she got out of her abusive relationship, “I gained my ability to be able to talk about what happened and then let it go.” Jacinda noted that because her counselor was there to listen to her thoughts and feelings, she was able to think through quite gradually how she should proceed in the aftermath of her violent relationship. Similarly, Sorelle stated that counseling worked because

It helped me realize why maybe I did [let myself get into relationship], but just to see it in different ways. It was the opportunity for me to really have somebody to listen, who could be there, so I could just talk about it and process it that way, really helped. It kinda helped me not to hold onto it.

Like Jacinda and Sorelle, Staci noted that counseling in the aftermath of a series of violent relationships

helped me with a lot of self-growth and self-discovery in order to learn. For a lot of years after getting out of the abusive relationships, I was doing drugs to hide from the emotions that I had, rather than um, identifying them and processing them. So it was kinda like those latent fears were still there; I was just covering them up.

Staci explained that she sought counseling because she wanted to find a healthy way to process those latent fears, rather than continuing to distract herself from them.

Changes in Goals

Nine percent of women ($n = 12$) reported that after their abusive relationship ended, they were inspired to pursue new life goals. Twenty-five percent of these women ($n = 3$) had also reported changes in life goals during the process of stay-leave decision-making.

Some of these women explained that since they left their violent partners, they had become more focused on themselves and their personal life goals rather than on goals related to their romantic relationships. Kathy explained that escaping an abusive relationship in high school “made me a lot more focused, I think. Not necessarily focused on marriage and life and children – just focused on myself and what I desire.” Like Kathy, Trista stated that her violent relationship gave her “new direction” in the form of changed career goals and a stronger desire to help others.

Four percent of women ($n = 5$) commented that they have returned to school in the aftermath of a violent relationship in order to pursue a career of their own. These women explained that they were not willing to become completely financially dependent on a romantic partner again, as such dependence had extended the length of time they had remained with a violent partner. For these participants, returning to school to pursue a career appeared to be a means of building self-efficacy in the wake of a destructive romantic relationship.

Norma explained that the year after she left her violent boyfriend, she completed her master’s thesis. She stated that this task improved her confidence because it helped her to make her own decisions and forced her to be responsible only for herself. This project helped Norma to feel independent and free to focus on something healthy and challenging, and eventually led her to secure a job that she loved. Similarly, Sonja used her decision to pursue a college education at age 46 as a way to channel her energy away from thinking about her last violent relationship. She explained, “I replaced relationships and that with my school. It’s like I’m putting as much energy into the school as I did the relationship.”

Joan concurred that she returned to school in order to divert her focus from her violent marriage. Joan explained that rather than focusing on negative thoughts about her failed marriage, she preferred to engage in more productive tasks that she hoped would bring her more fulfillment. She noted,

I think the most helpful thing for me right now is to focus on what I'm doing right now. Like I said, I haven't even thought of a relationship for...it's been over two years. I just want a normal life. And I went back to school – I'm going back to school, and I want a career, and I want to be able to get my youngest daughter through college. I just want to think about her, my kids, and myself for a change, and do what's right for us.

Changes in Coping or Behavior

Seven percent of women ($n = 9$) reported perceptions that they could cope better with life difficulties since they left a violent partner. Gina explained that she had learned better ways to handle her anger. She also reported that she knew at the time of her interview that remaining focused on her goals, such as pursuing a GED, would keep her out of unhealthy relationships and would decrease her temptation to drink alcohol. Gina stated that these strategies had worked well thus far in helping her to maintain her sobriety and to stay out of subsequent violent relationships.

Emily evidenced a similar response after leaving her abusive husband. In the aftermath of her marriage, Emily realized that she had displayed a pattern in her choice of violent partners that was likely tied to her experience in an abusive family of origin. Emily told her interviewer that she had become aware that she needed to improve her ability to take care of herself in order to avoid falling into similar patterns in the future.

By eating healthy food, exercising regularly, and choosing to be alone rather than become involved in an unhealthy relationship, Emily exclaimed that she was proudly cultivating a more independent and healthy lifestyle.

Georgia and Paula reported that they had begun drinking excessive amounts of alcohol during their violent relationships in order to cope with the abuse. Both realized in the aftermath of these relationships that this had been an ineffective solution to an unhealthy situation, and that in order to learn from and process their experiences, they had to stop drinking. At the time of her interview, Georgia was active in AA, and she reported that the support of the AA community had helped her to learn new ways of handling her stress. When she was interviewed, Paula stated that she was attending group therapy, and that the support she received there “helps me. I don’t usually drink now to deal with the pain, like [I used to] before.”

Lindsey, Alex, and Sorelle explained that they learned healthy coping skills through counselors they worked with in the aftermath of their violent relationships. Lindsey stated that she saw many counselors after leaving her violent ex-partner, but that the one she found most helpful taught her how to manage her anxiety better. Alex stated that counseling helped her to “understand and learn tools [for] how to deal with the feelings” she experienced in the aftermath of her violent relationship, which included intense anger, shame, and guilt. Alex noted at the time of her interview that she was still working through all of those feelings, but that she felt closer to resolving them the more she spent time talking about and processing them with supportive others. Sorelle explained that her counselor helped give her the tools she needed to process her feelings internally, including teaching her ways to decrease self-blame.

Karen and Courtney concurred that their counselors taught them helpful coping skills in the aftermath of their violent relationships. However, these women reported that they have had difficulty applying this knowledge because they continued to experience intense, negative emotions upon reflection about their violent relationships. Karen stated that she found herself using self-recrimination at times, although she stated that this was “something I’m learning to stop doing, [as] negative self-talk and judgment are not the way to recovery and learning to cope.”

Similarly, Courtney stated that “over the last few years, I’ve been working on trying to spend my time in the healing arts...[to try] to get all that stress and anger out of my system.” However, only a few weeks before her interview, Courtney had been diagnosed with endometriosis, which she feared would place her at risk for cancer. She explained that although she was trying to use the coping skills she’d learned with the ongoing help of a counselor, “all I’m doing is burning myself out.”

Four percent of women ($n = 5$) reported that their violent relationship influenced them to change aspects of their behavior for the better. When asked what influence her violent relationship has had on her, Brooke explained, “I learned to never use drugs.” Brooke’s ex-boyfriend had started to use drugs just before he abused her for the first time, and Brooke stated that since they broke up, she had done everything in her power to avoid losing control in that way.

Gina experienced assertiveness for the first time in the aftermath of her violent relationship. After she relocated with her children to a battered women’s shelter, she began to slowly build strength and confidence in this supportive context. Gina explained that once this change occurred,

It was like nobody knew who I was...[but] my sister could see the change. I was not the woman who would sit and listen. A woman with a voice, I could speak. I was a mother, a person.

Lindsey realized in the aftermath of her violent marriage that she hadn't set a good example for her children by staying with their father for sixteen years. During that time, she used to threaten to leave her husband without following through on this threat. After this happened a number of times, one of her children begged her to leave, telling her that she should follow through on her promise. Lindsey explained at the time of her interview that she had since learned to make sure she followed through on what she told her children she was going to do, because she wanted them to learn to take responsibility for their actions.

Changes in Religious Beliefs

A very small subset of women ($n = 6$; 5%) reported that they had experienced changes in their religious beliefs as a result of surviving an abusive relationship. These women reported that either new or altered religious beliefs helped them to reframe their experience in a positive way, and added meaning to their lives.

Beth explained that she attributed the positive changes she experienced in the aftermath of her violent relationship to the new faith she found in a relationship with God. Beth acknowledged that although she sought counseling after her abusive relationship ended, she felt most supported during this time by God. Beth reported that she felt God assisted her with making changes in her behavior so she wouldn't be at continued risk for additional abusive relationships. Similarly, Sally sought Christian counseling in the aftermath of her violent relationship. She felt that her rage dissipated

over time because this form of counseling inspired her to be more Christ-like, in that it helped her to forgive and to feel less angry with her ex-husband.

Jessica reported that she became a Christian after leaving her abusive high school boyfriend. She explained that her faith in God allowed her to heal from her experience because it helped her feel unconditionally supported. Jessica explained,

[I'd] probably have to say God [has provided me with the most support] because even if you are alone, He is always there. I'd say I have been healed. My heart has been healed since that time, and He's the only one that could do that. I'd attribute that healing to him.

However, Jessica noted at the time of her interview that her relationship had a somewhat negative influence on her because she trusted men less and was less willing to display vulnerability around them. Due to this discrepancy, it appears that Jessica's self-report of healing may be an example of growth in process rather than reflective of an experience of being fully healed.

Susan, who had lived with her husband in a tight-knit, fundamentalist religious community throughout their marriage, explained that she believed at the time of her interview that religion can be *harmful* for women who are in abusive relationships. Susan had been told her entire life that divorce was against God's will. She explained that these religious beliefs had kept her in a marriage that nearly ended her life and which negatively impacted her children. When Susan returned to her old community to seek a divorce, she noted that "the Christians [living in that community] thought it was my fault and that I didn't deserve a divorce." This angered Susan because despite the fact that she had suffered brutal beatings on a regular basis in front of her children for 18 years, her

neighbors and relatives believed that she, rather than her ex-husband, was the sinner. Susan explained that since this time, “I have left all religiosity behind.” She noted that it had since become her mission to help other women feel less shame as a result of religions like Christianity by writing a book that explained how organized religions can contribute negatively to the dynamics of an abusive relationship.

Summary of Posttraumatic Growth Experiences

Overall, participants described six major themes that were interpreted as indicative of posttraumatic growth. By far, the greatest number of positive changes women described in the aftermath of a violent relationship occurred: 1) within relationships they had after their violent relationship ended, 2) in the way they viewed themselves, and 3) in the way they cognitively appraised their violent relationship. Changes in life goals, coping, behavior, and religious beliefs were additionally reported by small subsets of women.

Like women who reported resilient behaviors and growth during their violent relationships, those who experienced posttraumatic growth described diverse manifestations of growth within each category and subcategory, and different pathways leading to this growth. This reveals the highly idiosyncratic nature of abusive relationships and the many different forms of growth that can occur in the wake of such traumatic experiences.

Participants described four different ways that their relationships were transformed after their abusive relationships ended. The first entailed finding new, healthier ways to relate to ex-partners with whom they had maintained contact. Participants reported either less charged emotional responses, attempts to experience

compassion or forgiveness for ex-partners, and that they had learned how to set more effective boundaries in their interactions with ex-partners.

Women who reported having healthier interactions with ex-partners in the aftermath of their violent relationships did not appear to have fully achieved the outcome of posttraumatic growth, however. Less charged emotional responses to ex-partners often took the form of numbness or apathy rather than extreme anger, anxiety, or fear. In this way, although these emotional responses were considered changes for the better, they seemed to constitute a possible stop along the road to the outcome of posttraumatic growth. Similarly, many women described having forgiven their ex-partners or viewing their ex-partners' actions with compassion. However, upon deeper examination, participants' responses were fraught with ambivalence. Women who stated that they had attempted to forgive their ex-partners as a result of religious beliefs or the need to make amends as part of a 12-step program continued to report intermittent feelings of anger and fear when thinking back to their partners' actions during the relationship. Finally, women who began to think about interactions with their violent ex-partners in a healthier manner and to act more assertively in these interactions still struggled at times with behaving in a consistently effective manner. However, because these women had worked hard to strengthen their sense of self and had come to believe that they should not tolerate manipulation by their ex-partners, these examples were considered growth in process.

This type of ongoing cognitive and emotional difficulty in regards to interactions with a violent partner after a relationship has ended is not surprising. It is known that traumatic events can create deep emotional bonds between victims and perpetrators that are difficult to break (Painter & Dutton, 1985). Continued interactions with a perpetrator

might trigger negative emotions and unhealthy ways of coping in women who have not fully resolved this trauma, and render resolution of the trauma compromised and extremely complicated. In addition, it might not be adaptive for women who are forced to maintain contact with an abusive ex-partner for the sake of their children to feel completely comfortable in these interactions, as letting one's guard down could lead to further violence, and possibly death.

A second change that women reported in their relationships after an abusive relationship ended consisted of altered views of, and new ways of behaving within, subsequent romantic relationships. Based on the lessons they had learned from a violent relationship, women reported changes in relationship ideals, more effective limit-setting, intolerance of abuse, and more contentment with new partners. Changes in relationship ideals included new, healthier ideas about what they wanted out of a romantic relationship, and about what behaviors they felt should comprise a healthy relationship. The majority of women whose relationship ideals changed in the aftermath of a violent relationship noted that they were more aware of specific behaviors that might signal abusive tendencies or more cautious about what type of men to choose as future romantic partners.

Other women noted that their violent relationship inspired them to engage in novel, healthier behaviors with subsequent romantic partners, which included learning how to set and stick to firm, effective limits with new partners. For a subset of participants, setting limits meant absolutely not tolerating any further physical abuse. Finally, some women reported experiencing less chaos and fear in subsequent romantic relationships, which was concurrent with feeling more contentment. These women felt

that subsequent romantic partners who treated them better had helped them to heal by setting a better example for what their future romantic relationships should entail.

A third type of change in relationships reported by participants consisted of strengthened bonds with either friends or family members in the aftermath of their violent relationships. During their violent relationship, many of these women reported that they had isolated themselves, or had been isolated by their partner, from supportive others who might challenge their relationship. Nonetheless, over $\frac{3}{4}$ of this subset of participants noted that after their violent relationship ended, feelings of either intense guilt or shame motivated them to seek help as a way of decreasing associated distress. Women most often sought help from counselors. For these women, the act of disclosing details about their abusive relationships facilitated a decrease in shame or guilt and inspired them to then reach out *beyond counselors* to talk with family members and friends about their experiences. This is consistent with previous research that has revealed that talking with supportive others about difficult personal experiences may facilitate emotional processing and cognitive reappraisal of those events (Lepore, 2001; Williams & Joseph, 1999).

Participants explained that they felt their friendships and relationships with family members were strengthened in the aftermath of their violent relationships for one of two reasons. The first was because they sought more help, and received support they perceived as helpful and positive, from these individuals at that time, while the second was because they realized how valuable these relationships were after surviving a relationship that had made them feel completely isolated. Validating responses by supportive individuals appeared to improve coping, increase participants' feelings of self-

efficacy, and inspire cognitive, emotional, and behavioral change, as Williams and Joseph (1999) suggested can occur in the aftermath of trauma.

A final change women reported in their relationships was a desire to help other victims of IPV. These participants felt that they could offer helpful suggestions or support others who were involved in abusive relationships based on what they'd learned from their experiences. Some women wanted to help others as a way of contributing to society, while others felt that helping others would assist them in their own healing process. While some women noted a general aspiration to help anyone they could, others expressed a desire to educate individuals on a social level by making educational and legal systems more responsive to the needs of victims.

The second major realm of growth women described in the aftermath of their violent relationships consisted of changes in self-perception. Changes in self-perception manifested in several different ways for participants. These changes took the form of dramatic improvements in self-esteem, greater self-acceptance, enhanced feelings of strength or independence, and changes in identity.

Improvements in self-esteem and self-acceptance occurred gradually in most women. This type of improvement most commonly occurred after participants they sought out counselors, friends, or family members to validate their nearly-destroyed self-worth. However, a subset of these women credited time and cognitive and emotional processing that occurred independent of a positive support network with associated improvements in self-esteem and self-acceptance. Both sets of women described increases in self-esteem and self-acceptance that seemed to coincide with a decrease in

shame and guilt and two realizations: 1) that the abuse was not their fault, and 2) that they deserved to be treated better by a romantic partner.

Interestingly, although improvements in self-esteem and self-acceptance appeared to occur in analogous ways, only two women actually endorsed changes in both types of self-perception. This indicates that these may be separate dimensions which, through parallel pathways, might lead to posttraumatic growth in female victims of IPV.

Women who reported increased strength in the wake of an abusive relationship explained that surviving that experience taught them that they could tolerate more difficult circumstances than they'd ever imagined. Participants who claimed an emergent sense of independence described a difficult but meaningful process of proving to themselves that they did not need to rely on a romantic partner for financial support. A subset of these women told interviewers that they had purposely stayed out of romantic relationships for some time after their violent relationship ended in order to cultivate this sense of independence and to get back in touch with their interests and goals. A final subset of women explained that surviving a violent relationship fundamentally altered their identity by making them view relationships and themselves quite differently.

The third major realm of posttraumatic growth described by participants included changes in their cognitive appraisal of a violent relationship after it ended. Changes in women's appraisals of their violent relationships included increased awareness of the abusive dynamics within the relationship, the attribution of meaning and positive reappraisal to the relationship, and acceptance and integration of the experience.

Women reported greater awareness of abusive dynamics after their violent relationships ended in the form of either: 1) labeling their experiences as abusive, 2) an

improved ability to discern telltale signs of violence, 3) an understanding of how the cycle of violence was perpetuated, or 4) an awareness of *their own* unhealthy contributions to the relationship.

Women who began to label their relationship as abusive, who improved their knowledge of the cycle of violence, and who became better at recognizing warning signs of violence in future partners all learned this information from counselors, friends, or future romantic partners. Women who had learned to label their experiences as abusive may have come to this realization later than other women because they tended to come from abusive families of origin, where IPV was viewed as somewhat normative. The increased awareness of the intergenerational nature of the cycle of violence appeared to motivate these women to attempt to break the cycle in the future.

Several women courageously sought resources in the aftermath of a violent relationship in order to help them understand more about how their own actions during that relationship may have contributed to the unhealthy relational dynamics. These women pursued counseling or read self-help books on IPV in an attempt to understand why they became involved in, and stayed in, a violent relationship. Participants who experienced this intense form of self-examination reported that it made them more aware of their patterns in relationships and more cautious about future choices of romantic partners. For some women, this entailed taking responsibility for their actions during the relationship which may have exacerbated their own suffering, such as using drugs to numb the pain.

Another group of women noted that they had reframed their experience in a violent relationship from a situation that brought them pain and suffering to one that

helped teach them important life lessons. These women stated that the suffering they experienced as a victim of IPV was meaningful because it instigated growth and positive change in their lives. This form of positive reappraisal occurred quite gradually, over a long period of time, after their intense negative emotions about the violent relationship decreased significantly. Positive reappraisal helped these women to retain their hope for the future, a sense of humor about their experience, or to view their violent relationship as a learning experience rather than a personal failure.

A final positive change in the way women appraised their violent relationships after they ended included reports that they had accepted and integrated their violent relationship as part of a larger, unified life narrative. Some women described this experience as an outcome they had achieved, while others noted that this was a form of growth they continued to struggle with as they attempted to move on with their lives. Talking about their experiences with supportive individuals such as counselors, friends, family members, or a higher power facilitated acceptance and understanding in many of these women.

Additionally, participants reported posttraumatic growth in the area of life goals, coping or behavior, or religious beliefs. One subset of women noted that they were inspired to better themselves in some way in the aftermath of their violent relationships. For most of these participants, this took the form of enhancing their ability to function independently and focusing on their own interests rather than those of a romantic partner. Another group of women explained that they had improved their coping skills following years of counseling, through which they learned better ways to manage stress and painful emotions, and how to improve self-care, stay focused on personal goals, and remain

sober. A final group of women noted that being in a violent relationship has strengthened their beliefs in God or led to new beliefs about the power of healing through religion. In another case, one woman's negative experience in a tight-knit, fundamental religious community led her to believe that religion only contributed to the shame and guilt battered women can feel, rather than serving as a healing force.

Overall, women in this dataset described multiple forms of posttraumatic growth. In general, participants' healing experiences in the aftermath of a violent relationship took many forms. Some women experienced growth in self-perception, others experienced changes in life goals, coping, or religious beliefs, and still other participants experienced positive changes in their relationships or in the way they appraised their violent relationship. Although a number of participants reported changes across many of these dimensions, others experienced growth within one circumscribed area. These findings revealed that there are commonalities as well as idiosyncrasies in the way battered women experience growth in the aftermath of violent relationships. Such a finding has important implications for battered women who seek counseling or support services after a violent relationship has ended.

The most notable areas of posttraumatic growth in this sample of female survivors of IPV occurred in the form of changes in relationships, self-perception, and cognitive appraisal of the violent relationship. The most salient changes reported were cognitive and emotional, rather than behavioral, in nature. The majority of women reported learning multiple new ways to view themselves, other important individuals in their lives, their violent ex-partners, their violent relationship, their life goals, and their religious beliefs. They also described growth in the form of increased feelings of strength, self-

confidence, and independence. A large number of women reported that sharing their experiences of shame and guilt helped to alleviate these intense and negative emotions, particularly when these emotions were shared in the company of supportive individuals. Although a number of women reported behavioral changes such as attaining sobriety, help-seeking behavior, improvements in coping skills, and healthier choices with future romantic partners and their violent ex-partner after their violent relationship ended, these changes occurred following significant cognitive and emotional growth.

Chapter IV: Discussion

Posttraumatic Growth

Many important findings emerged from the present study. This study is the first to reveal several specific dimensions of posttraumatic growth in female survivors of IPV. Participants in this sample reported changes in relations to others, self-perception, cognitive appraisal of their violent relationships, life goals, coping and behavior, or religious beliefs in the aftermath of violent relationships. Some women experienced no posttraumatic growth, while others experienced up to 11 forms of posttraumatic growth. Combinations of types of growth varied considerably, and no clear pattern or prototype emerged to explain battered women's experiences of posttraumatic growth.

These findings merge relatively closely with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) model of posttraumatic growth. This model encompasses five domains, which include greater appreciation for life and changed sense of priorities; warmer, more intimate relationships with others; enhanced feelings of personal strength; recognition of new possibilities for one's life; and spiritual development. By far, the greatest degree of overlap is that participants in this sample described multiple positive changes in both romantic and non-romantic relationships. Changes in relationships emerged in the form of accepting help and seeking support from others, alterations in romantic ideals, new cognitive appraisals of the violent relationship, healthier interactions with ex-partners, novel ways of thinking about and behaving within subsequent romantic relationships, and desires to help other survivors of IPV. In addition, women reported changes in self-perception that included enhanced feelings of strength, independence, confidence, and self-acceptance. These changes in self-perception appeared to be key to the formation of

posttraumatic growth as well as to both growth and resilience during the stay-leave decision-making process.

Although some women in this study reported a greater appreciation for life, changed priorities, recognition of new life possibilities, and enhanced spiritual beliefs in the aftermath of a violent relationship, these dimensions did not appear to be the most prominent aspects of posttraumatic growth in this group of women. Women who *did* experience positive changes in their goals, possibilities, or beliefs in the aftermath of a violent relationship may not have actually experienced new cognitions so much as gained the opportunity to *openly express* these viewpoints once they were free of the control of a violent partner. In other words, because many participants likely had to suppress their own needs during an abusive relationship to meet the needs of their violent partners, they may not have had the opportunity to expand these viewpoints until well after they left these partners. This may explain the apparent dearth of growth in these areas at the time of participants' interviews. As such, in this dataset, posttraumatic growth in battered women appeared to be characterized by greater growth in the realms of relationships and personal strength.

One important finding was that a new dimension of posttraumatic growth emerged which did not appear to be present in Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) model. Changes in women's cognitive appraisals of their violent relationships were common in participants, and were considered a sign of growth during the relationship as well as after the relationship. Only two of the three sub-themes that emerged from this larger theme ("Deriving meaning from the violent relationship" and "Acceptance and integration of the trauma experience") appeared to match Tedeschi and Calhoun's model. Deriving

meaning from the traumatic experience appeared to fit within Tedeschi and Calhoun's category of "Recognition of new possibilities for one's life," as women in this category noted that their suffering had led to positive reappraisal about their feelings, goals, and general life path. Acceptance and integration of the trauma experience was related to Tedeschi and Calhoun's category of "Personal Strength," as this factor encompasses an acceptance of the way things work out in the aftermath of trauma.

The remaining sub-theme under the larger theme of changes within women's appraisals of their violent relationships, "Greater awareness of abuse dynamics," did *not* fit as readily into Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) model. One-third of participants reported greater awareness of abuse dynamics in the aftermath of a violent relationship, either in the form of labeling the relationship as abusive, learning about the specific dynamics of abuse, or becoming aware of, and taking responsibility for, their own contributions to the unhealthy dynamic in their violent relationships. This dimension of posttraumatic growth appeared to be specific to populations of battered women. However, awareness of abuse dynamics may occur in survivors of other types of interpersonal violence, as well. It is possible that this type of cognitive awareness helps survivors of interpersonal violence to make positive cognitive and behavioral changes in future relationships.

Additionally, this finding indicates that cognitive reappraisal which occurs during trauma and in the aftermath of trauma is, not surprisingly, likely to be trauma-specific. Cognitive reappraisals of the trauma may not be as common in trauma survivors for whom it is not adaptive to reflect upon the *nature* of the trauma so much as its *consequences*. In the present study, cognitive reappraisals of violent partners and violent

relationships appeared to assist women with deciding to leave and/or eventually forgive violent partners, seeking healthier partners, viewing the violent relationship as a learning experience and a stepping stone for future growth, and taking responsibility for actions they hoped not to repeat in the future. See Figure 3 for a comparison of the posttraumatic growth dimensions that emerged in this study to those postulated by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996).

The relatively stronger emphasis on changes in self-perception and relationships in this sample of battered women, over the other dimensions of posttraumatic growth identified by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), may also be the result of the intimate, interpersonal nature of the traumas suffered by participants. It has been established that traumatic bonds often form between perpetrators and victims of violence as a result of an unequal power relationship and the intermittent cycle of abuse and honeymoon phases that comprise the cycle of violence (Painter & Dutton, 1985). As such, battered women who may be financially, emotionally, and/or socially dependent on abusers who have both physical and emotional power over them may be more prone to both relational and personal growth when these bonds break. In order to change these learned contingencies and pursue healthier life choices after leaving a violent partner, it follows that battered women are likely to need extensive time to resurrect their confidence, to engage in intense self-examination, and to practice how to act in new relationships.

Successes in these realms and positive support from friends, family members, or counselors would expectably incrementally increase the confidence of battered women as well as their faith in others. According to Williams and Joseph (1999), positive validation from others in the aftermath of trauma tends to increase confidence, improve coping,

strengthen faith in others, and lead to re-appraisal of traumatic events. Similarly, Lepore, Silver, Wortman, & Wayment (1996) found that the perceived benefits of confidence in the aftermath of trauma are dependent upon how others react to this increased confidence. Thus, it may be that in order to experience growth in life goals, beliefs, and awareness of life possibilities, battered women need to first rebuild a sense of self and procure a positive social support network within which to make additional changes.

Nonetheless, participants in this study reported undergoing a similar process to other individuals who have evidenced posttraumatic growth, as explained by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004). Each woman who reported the experience of posttraumatic growth noted that a violent relationship had impacted her in the form of challenging beliefs about herself, others, or the world in general. Participants experienced extreme emotional distress that persisted for months or years after they had left a violent partner, most notably in the form of intense feelings of shame and/or guilt about their actions within the violent relationship. For most of these women, this distress was coupled with ongoing attempts to cognitively process the experience. Consistent with Tedeschi and Calhoun's model, many women initially reported intrusive thoughts that decreased over time as they were replaced gradually with more deliberate cognitions about the nature of their experience in a violent relationship.

In this study, women who actively avoided their emotions or who refused to talk about their experiences with supportive others outside of the interview context reported less growth than women who explained that they wanted to learn how to cope with, understand, and move past negative emotions and cognitions. Specifically, shame and guilt often deterred these women from seeking help, actively coping with their emotions,

and feeling confident in their ability to leave a violent partner. This is consistent with research findings that women who blame themselves for perceived inadequacy during a trauma are more likely to withdraw socially and attempt to manage their stress independent of others (Brewin et al., 1989). Indeed, this subset of women also endorsed greater distress, which is not surprising given the finding in a recent meta-analysis that lack of social support more strongly predicts PTSD symptoms than any other variable (Brewin et al., 2000).

However, consistent with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) model, once women disclosed the abuse to supportive others or struggled with this distress internally for a long period of time in an attempt to understand their experience, they tended to experience decreases in both negative emotions and intrusive cognitions. As postulated by Tedeschi and Calhoun's model, the more participants self-disclosed to individuals in their social support network that they perceived as helpful, the more their shame and guilt decreased, and the clearer their thinking became about their violent relationship. This finding is also consistent with an emotion-focused perspective, which postulates that healing occurs through a process of active engagement with one's feelings (Greenberg, 2003). Those women in this study who struggled with distress internally stated that they chose to do so because they had previously received social support that they did not perceive as helpful, which lends support to Williams and Joseph's (1999) notion that social support that is not perceived as helpful can prolong and maintain distress. Nonetheless, as their distress decreased, participants' self-confidence tended to increase, which appeared to at least partially inspire eventual cognitive, emotional, and behavioral change.

As the amount and type of growth experienced by participants varied considerably, these findings suggest that posttraumatic growth may occur along a continuum. Such a formulation appears to be consistent with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) model, in that the hypothesized process of schema reorganization following trauma is assumed to develop gradually over time in a non-linear, dynamic fashion. Women who were interviewed for this study essentially constructed a trauma narrative in order to tell their stories. The *similarities* in their stories indicate that there may be patterns that characterize the growth women experience at various phases during, and in the aftermath of, an abusive relationship. The *differences* in their stories indicate that participants may fall at different places along a continuum of healing, depending on individual factors and how fully they have recovered from the experience. Many participants' responses indicate that they were still in the process of actively processing, developing, and integrating their trauma into their life narrative at the time of their interview.

Although the findings from the present study appear to fit relatively well into Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996, 2004) framework of posttraumatic growth, it should be noted that this theory may be incomplete in its inability to explain *why* individuals are motivated towards growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005). In response to this apparent omission, Joseph and Linley used organismic valuing theory to explain growth motivation in individuals who have experienced trauma. Organismic valuing theory theorizes that human beings are inherently growth-oriented organisms who are naturally motivated by virtue of innate tendencies to integrate psychological experiences in a constructive manner that will bring them greater satisfaction. According to this theory,

posttraumatic growth occurs because it is in human nature to want to integrate and re-organize cognitive self-structures in a way that positively accommodates trauma-related information. This accommodation process is characterized by alternating states of intrusive thoughts and avoidance, coupled with distress, all of which decrease when the trauma is fully cognitively assimilated in the context of positive social support. Such accommodations often lead to a search for meaning, which will be positively valenced (i.e., “Although bad things can happen, I feel lucky that I survived, and plan to live more fully because life is short”) if the trauma has been accommodated in a positive fashion. If the trauma is accommodated in a negative fashion, these authors argued, it may be because of pre-existing pathology, problematic attachments, and/or a lack of social support.

The results of the present study are also consistent with Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich’s (2006) recent meta-analysis on benefit-finding. Their examination of 87 studies revealed that benefit-finding following traumatic events was related to positive well-being as well as to intrusive thoughts about stressors, and was moderated by the amount of time since the trauma. Specifically, benefit-finding was related to low levels of depression and high levels of positive affect when at least two years had elapsed since the traumatic event. These authors concluded that although making life changes can elicit eventual growth, this process can also be disruptive and stressful, particularly if these life changes are ongoing. Helgeson et al. concurred with Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) notion that growth and distress likely constitute two distinct dimensions, a finding also confirmed by concurrent but variant reports of distress and growth by participants who comprised this study.

In addition, Helgeson et al. (2006) importantly noted that researchers should attempt to distinguish empirically between growth as an outcome and growth as a process, as have others (Park & Helgeson, 2006). Helgeson et al. stated that in earlier phases of trauma, growth may constitute a coping process, whereas in the latter stages of healing, it may reflect a completed outcome. Park and Helgeson implied that current research measures do not adequately distinguish between the two. The present study revealed a wide range of growth experiences in the aftermath of violent relationships, some of which women described in terms of an outcome, and some which appeared to be changes women were in the process of making. As Park and Helgeson noted, although responses to open-ended questions may yield more authentic responses than quantitative measures, these responses may be incomplete nonetheless. Difficulty distinguishing between growth as a process and an outcome in this study may have also been an artifact of the methodology, as women were not specifically asked to describe the nature and course of their growth experiences.

Findings also confirmed that extensive growth can occur in battered women during the process of stay-leave decision-making, as has been reported in previous qualitative studies (Landenburger, 1998; Mills, 1985; Moss et al., 1997; Ulrich, 1991). Participants reported growth in outside relationships, self-perception, cognitive appraisals of their violent relationship, and coping skills while they were still in an abusive relationship. This indicates that the process of posttraumatic growth for some individuals who experience ongoing trauma may be initiated during the trauma itself. However, the time points at which women reported growth varied considerably by participant. Some women reported growth during the relationship but no growth after the relationship,

others reported growth at both time points, and many other women described the occurrence of growth only in the aftermath of a violent relationship.

These findings can be explained in multiple ways. The dynamic nature of abusive relationships is such that women appear to learn and to grow very gradually as their confidence improves and they make the final decision to leave an abuser permanently (Fiore Lerner & Kennedy, 2000; Landenburger, 1998; Mills, 1985; Moss et al., 1997). Carver's (1998) catastrophe model may add to an explanation of this non-linear process. According to Carver, individuals with higher levels of confidence will attempt to reduce the discrepancy between their current circumstances and optimal levels of functioning, while individuals with lower levels of confidence will not. In this sample, enhanced self-confidence appeared to be a key factor that influenced women to engage in active coping efforts which led to decisions to leave a violent partner and attempt to grow from the experience.

On the other hand, intense shame and guilt, which weakened women's feelings of strength, confidence, and independence, tended to inhibit action. This finding is concerning in light of the fact that previous research has revealed that low levels of confidence and high levels of shame can keep women in abusive relationships for longer periods of time and can increase their vulnerability to return to a violent partner (Taylor, 2003; Fiore Lerner & Kennedy, 2000). Such a finding has important implications for interventions with battered women, particularly those in the early stages of stay-leave decision-making or leaving a violent partner.

It may be that increases in confidence during a violent relationship occurred only in those women who had internal and/or external resources available to them that might

have facilitated such growth. It would not be surprising, according to Carver's (1998) model, that confidence might wax and wane depending on how isolated women are, the severity of emotional or physical abuse they are experiencing, whether or not they have a prior history of abuse, and how many supportive individuals are available to challenge their negative self-viewpoints. Examples from this study revealed that the development of positive self-perceptions in participants occurred quite gradually, during instances where women either spent time away from violent partners or sought out help from supportive individuals outside the relationship. The emotional support and educational tools participants received from these supportive individuals often enhanced their self-confidence, which in turn seemed to elicit further growth. However, these forms of support-seeking or distance from one's violent partner often occurred years into the relationship, which may partially explain why some women stayed with violent partners for as long as they did. Support and distance from perpetrators was not an option for some women, which may explain why growth did not occur, or was extremely gradual, for a subset of participants.

Carver's (1998) model may additionally explain why it takes some women several years to make positive life changes in the aftermath of an abusive relationship. Women who may have had the chance to build self-confidence during their violent relationships would be expected to experience vacillations in this confidence once they left a violent partner if they continued to experience threats to their safety or had to remain in contact, or share parenting responsibilities, with that ex-partner. These vacillations in confidence may also partially explain previous findings that a subset of women in the present study who took action to leave a violent relationship may not feel

confident in their decision until at least a year later (Fiore Lerner & Kennedy, 2000). It is possible that the women in Fiore Lerner and Kennedy's study were more tempted to return to their abusive ex-partners when they had been out of the relationship for six months or less because they lacked the confidence to take action to reduce the discrepancy between their current and ideal circumstances.

A motivational interviewing approach (Miller & Rollnick, 1993), which applies the transtheoretical model of change to decision-making (e.g., Prochaska & DeClemente, 1986), can further explain how growth manifests during stay-leave decision-making. This model suggests that individuals vacillate between several stages of change before thinking about, deciding on, acting upon, and maintaining an outcome. Even after decisions to change are made, according to this model, it is not uncommon for individuals to return to prior stages of motivation and change when their confidence wavers.

In addition, decisional balance theory may also explain the non-linear process of change observed in battered women (Janis & Mann, 1997). Decisional balance theory assumes that decision-making under difficult circumstances includes consideration of comparative pros and cons based on how these may impact the self and others, and the degree to which one's self and others approve of the choices made. Janis and Mann postulated the presence of at least eight factors that individuals consider when deciding to change their behavior. In 1994, Prochaska et al. found upon analysis of 12 problem behaviors that Janis and Mann's model could be simplified to include only two factors: a consideration of the relative weight of pros and cons in almost any given situation. These authors also found that decision-making is impacted by the stage of change an individual is in. In addition, they found that in most cases, the pros will tend to outweigh the cons in

regards to changing problematic behaviors when action is taken and change is maintained.

In 2001, Fiore, Kennedy, Painter, and Paluso conducted a follow-up study examining decisional balance in a subsample of 251 battered women from the Domestic Violence Project who were either in or out of a violent relationship. In this study, they piloted a measure of decisional balance based on the work of Janis and Mann (1977) and Prochaska et al. (1994). As part of this measure, participants were asked to rate how they were currently feeling about their decision to leave a violent partner. Not surprisingly, Fiore et al. found that women in the precontemplation and contemplation phases rated the pros to leaving as low and the cons to leaving as high. However, these authors found that women who were in the preparation, action, and maintenance phases of leaving a violent relationship rated the pros and cons of their decision as *relatively equal*. This finding stood in contrast to Prochaska et al.'s findings that action and maintenance tend to be associated with greater pros than cons.

Fiore et al.'s (2001) findings suggest that even women who are further along in the stages of change in regards to leaving a violent partner remain at ongoing risk to return to this partner because they may not perceive that the gains of such an act outweigh the potential losses. From this perspective, the development of growth both during and after a violent relationship might only occur during those times when women's readiness to change aligns with awareness of the benefits of being out of the violent relationship and concurrent increases in self-confidence. In addition, women who are willing to take responsibility for behavior they enacted within a violent relationship after they have left an abusive partner may also be more likely to exhibit growth, as

evidenced by findings from the current study. However, women in this study appeared to take action despite lower confidence and equal decisional balance. This suggests that for women in violent relationships, confidence may lag or be in the process of developing when they leave a violent partner, as opposed to serving as the stimulus that provokes action.

Resilience

This study also revealed that battered women display resilience both during the process of stay-leave decision-making and in the aftermath of violent relationships, as was previously observed by Werner-Wilson et al. (2000). Many women in this sample displayed successful coping efforts in the face of adversity that appeared to be reflective of their functioning prior to the relationship. These findings confirm previous research on resilience, which indicates that resilient individuals tend to cope successfully based on their own efforts, initiative, strength, and endurance (Anthony, 1974; Bartelt, 1994), particularly when they receive consistent positive social support from a network of helpful individuals (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Werner-Wilson et al., 2000).

Some differences emerged in the resilient dimensions reported by women in this sample as compared to Werner-Wilson et al.'s (2000) sample of battered women. In their study, Werner-Wilson et al. found that women had to accomplish six tasks before they could leave a violent partner. These included: 1) an awareness that the relationship was abusive, 2) an enhanced sense of self, 3) hopefulness that things would be better once they left, 4) education about resources, 5) a safe place to go, and 6) getting into therapy.

In the present study, resilience during the process of stay-leave decision-making emerged primarily in the form of an enhanced sense of self. Women reported that

intermittent glimpses of self-confidence, strength, and their “true identities” over the course of their abusive relationships eventually inspired them to leave a violent partner. This process was often, although not always, facilitated by supportive individuals such as counselors, friends, or family members who were present to challenge their choice to remain in the relationship, educate them about resources, and encourage emotional and cognitive processing of their experience. Individuals who did not seek social support reported that they often chose to cope with the trauma internally because they had negative experiences when they reached out to others. These women appeared to display less resilience than women who sought social support in the aftermath of trauma. This is consistent with findings that other individuals’ points of view can impact the way traumatic events are interpreted and processed, and that PTSD symptoms can worsen and be prolonged with others react negatively to survivors’ attempts to cope in the aftermath of trauma (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Lepore, 2001; Williams & Joseph, 1999; Guay et al., 2006). The remaining dimensions described by Werner-Wilson et al. (2000) (i.e., hopefulness, awareness that the relationship was abusive and finding a safe place to go) were present in some participants, but did not figure prominently in women’s resilient responses.

Women in the present study who described resilient responses during the process of stay-leave decision-making reported similar experiences to what Moss et al. (1997) identified in their study of battered women. Moss et al. explained that the final phase of stay-leave decision-making in their study consisted of women identifying that they had “lost themselves” in the relationship, and that they deserved to reclaim their personal interests, skills, and identity as an independent person. The results of the present study

confirm this process. Perhaps most importantly, they indicate that reclaiming oneself in the form of reconnecting with one's strength, confidence, and "true self" may be central to some women's decisions to leave a violent relationship.

Participants in this study evidenced a wider range of resilient responses once they had left a violent partner. This is not surprising in light of the many obstacles women faced while still in a violent relationship, such as intense fear and threats to their or their children's safety. In the aftermath of their violent relationships, women displayed resilience not only in their views of themselves, but also in the form of renewed trust within subsequent relationships, and strengthened faith, spirituality, or religious beliefs.

One interesting finding was that many women underwent the process of reclaiming their self-esteem, their power, control, or independence, or their identity *after leaving* a violent partner. Women who reported that they successfully reclaimed their power, confidence, and identity in the aftermath of a violent relationship described doing so over months and years of formal therapy or through consistent informal support from friends, family members, or subsequent romantic partners. This finding reveals that a strengthened sense of self during the violent relationship is not always a necessary or sufficient catalyst for leaving a violent partner. The fact that a strengthening of self occurred across varying time points in participants indicates that the process of reclaiming one's self may thus be dynamic and non-linear, much like the process of posttraumatic growth.

Many women also described a process of fighting to retain their ability to love or to trust subsequent partners in the aftermath of a violent relationship, as their ability to do so had been compromised by their negative experiences with a violent partner. Central to

this process, again, was an initial reconnection with affirmative portions of their identity (i.e., as a survivor rather than a victim) and active engagement with their emotions. This is consistent with contemporary trauma theories, which postulate that trauma resolution entails integrating and assimilating the facts of the trauma with emotional memories of the trauma (van der Kolk, 1993). From a therapeutic, emotion-focused perspective, the act of experiencing emotion directly is viewed as central to eliciting positive changes in emotion (Greenberg, 2003).

In many cases, counselors or friends facilitated emotional release, which strengthened participants' confidence over time. Once their confidence had been renewed, women found the courage to pursue new romantic relationships, despite their fears and concerns about future threats of violence. Similar to research on couples therapy, women in this sample reported greater contentment in romantic relationships that followed a violent relationship when they felt comfortable openly expressing their emotions to subsequent partners (Greenberg, 2003). Women who experienced strengthened faith or spiritual beliefs in the aftermath of a violent relationship explained that these viewpoints helped them to retain a sense of hope for the future, compassion for their ex-partner, and faith that they could thrive again.

Implications and Suggestions for Clinicians

There are several important implications of these findings, particularly for treatment providers and individuals who provide social support for women both during and in the aftermath of violent relationships. First, it is clear that battered women display resilience and growth both during the process of stay-leave decision-making and in the aftermath of their violent relationships. The emergence of resilient and growth-oriented

responses may begin as soon as women enter a violent relationship or years after the relationship has ended. These responses may occur intermittently throughout the relationship, disappear for periods of time, and re-emerge during moments when women seek help, talk about their experiences, and/or release associated emotion. Resilience and growth appear to require a willingness to remain engaged with intense, negative emotions, time away from one's abuser or in the presence of supportive others, chances to improve self-efficacy outside of the home, and the rebuilding or building of strength, confidence, independence, and/or power. These findings are consistent with the recommendations of therapists who specialize in trauma, especially those who integrate the use of trauma narratives within the therapeutic framework (Foa & Rothbaum, 1998; Herman, 1992; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) recently postulated a model that clinicians can use to facilitate posttraumatic growth in trauma survivors. This general treatment approach consists of a combined cognitive and narrative constructivist framework that is largely consistent with other trauma treatments. Tedeschi and Calhoun explain that initially, the focus of treatment should be to decrease intense emotions and teach coping skills to help survivors manage distressing emotions. When distressing emotions are under control, these authors speculated, trauma survivors will be able to remain cognitively engaged in treatment. These authors suggested that clinicians should listen very carefully to the client's "language of crisis" and pay close attention to a client's emotional responses so they can join the client wherever she is in the process of grieving. Clinicians should work within the existential framework of the client and take note of the client's cognitive biases without initially correcting them. Clients should be encouraged to tell their stories

over and over again while clinicians listen in an empathic fashion, without attempting to problem-solve.

Through telling their stories, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) speculated, clients will begin to self-correct cognitive biases. This form of self-correction occurs with the clinician's assistance, as clinicians are expected to listen carefully to how the trauma narrative evolves over time and reflect and highlight these changes to clients. Clinicians are also expected to label any themes of growth that emerge in therapy sessions. As talking extensively about the trauma will often be difficult for clients, clinicians are encouraged to use metaphor when appropriate to help them understand and process their experiences. Finally, clinicians can assign homework to assist clients with recognizing any positive changes that emerge in their cognitions, emotions, and behavior.

Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) treatment model appears to be applicable for battered women, whose healing process seems to be similar overall to that of other trauma survivors. However, the range of emotion experienced by battered women both during and after a violent relationship may be more broad, and may thus require a more specialized treatment approach. Like other trauma victims, battered women often undergo a process of confusion, frustration, anger, and grief over their experiences and the loss of the relationship. However, in addition to these emotions, battered women additionally tend to feel intense shame and/or guilt for their choice to remain in a violent relationship or return to a violent partner. Furthermore, many battered women face the reality of continued danger even after they have left a violent partner, which can maintain extreme fear reactions. Thus, the experience of battered women is qualitatively different than that of individuals who find that their house has burned down or who are victims of random

crime. As such, clinicians who work with battered women need to be aware of the pervasive influence of shame, guilt, fear, and ruptured attachments on battered women's self-esteem, beliefs, goals, relationships, and behavior.

Tangney and Dearing (2002) explained that the relationship between shame and self-esteem is likely bidirectional. In effect, low self-esteem can set the stage for frequent experiences of shame, and intense shame can lead to, and maintain feelings of, low self-esteem. Yet, as this study reveals, shame is not always a negative emotion. Several women explained that intense shame and guilt often served as motivators for them to seek help, as these emotions caused them either serious distress and/or functional impairment.

In fact, these findings reveal that shame and guilt can be both immobilizing *and* mobilizing for battered women. Whether shame leads to avoidance or help-seeking in this population appears to be a function of time and level of distress, among other influential individual and social factors. Many women reported that initially, they felt such pervasive shame and guilt that they did not want to admit they were in an abusive relationship for fear that others would judge them. At this point in the relationship, shame and guilt *inhibited* women's decisions to seek help or to leave a violent partner. However, when participants' feelings of shame or guilt increased to a level that became uncomfortable or unbearable, these emotions served as catalysts for change and growth. Many women in this study eventually sought therapy as a way of purposefully decreasing shame or guilt. Once their shame or guilt decreased, participants reported many types of gains, and described multiple pathways to growth. In almost all cases, women's reports of decreased shame or guilt coincided with reports of positive change and growth, most notably in the

form of realizing that they deserved to be treated better in a relationship, and that they were not to blame for the abuse.

Tangney and Dearing (2002) cautioned that although shame can serve as a motivator in treatment, it can also negatively impact the therapeutic process. These authors explained that shame is often exacerbated when individuals seek help because of a social stigma in this country associated with receiving therapy. Coupled with the intense stigma associated with surviving IPV, battered women are likely to experience even more resistance to seeking formal help. The process of therapy itself is additionally fraught with shame because clients are expected to reveal details about their innermost selves, which can frequently elicit deep feelings of shame and embarrassment. Tangney and Dearing explained that unearthing feelings of shame within the therapy context often leads to withdrawal or anger rather than ongoing engagement with that negative emotion.

Further, the majority of women in this study lived in rural, frontier, or reservation communities. In small communities where conformity is valued and private lives are often subject to public scrutiny, shame might actually serve as an adaptive response. Individuals in rural areas may know less about how to respond effectively to victims of abuse and espouse more traditional gender roles that do not pathologize abuse. Battered women may also be isolated and treated as outcasts, with few individuals willing to openly support their move towards independence because of fears of retaliation from others in the social network. Any attempts to help battered women may also become public knowledge, which can result in further abuse to victims if the abuser becomes aware of such an intervention. Therefore, shame and lack of disclosure may actually *protect* rural battered women from further abuse, unfair judgment, and possible social

exclusion. Rural treatment providers need to be particularly sensitive to this issue when creating interventions to ensure that the recommendations they make in a client's best interest are not actually contraindicated within the context of his or her support network.

However, most treatment providers are likely to agree that when and if battered women seek therapy, facilitating decreases in shame and guilt should serve as a central treatment goal. Like Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), Tangney and Dearing (2002) noted that the experience of shame and guilt will tend to decrease the more clients tell their stories and self-correct cognitive misconceptions about themselves. Therapists can assist in this healing process by labeling experience of shame, helping clients to realize that many events about which they are ashamed were beyond their control, and to challenge irrational cognitions that maintain shame and guilt. Clinicians can also teach clients to distinguish between shame and guilt, as shame is directed toward the self, and guilt concerns one's actions as the prime focus of negative evaluation. Tangney and Dearing noted that, quite often, the mere experience of being heard, accepted unconditionally, and understood by a therapist can facilitate decreases in shame. They also stated that humor can be an effective tool to combat shame, as it helps to put the experience in perspective, as long as it is clear to the client that the therapist is laughing *with* them, and not *at* them.

In addition, as building a strong sense of self seems to be central to women's ability to heal from an abusive relationship, clinicians should also invest considerable effort in helping women to recover aspects of their identity they felt that they lost while in an abusive relationship, or to gain a new sense of empowerment or independence. Clinicians should thus undertake efforts to improve self-efficacy, feelings of power and control, and independence in women who seek support while they are still in an abusive

relationship, as well as in battered women who have left a violent partner. Work on strengthening the self should occur through all phases of treatment, as low confidence can lead to decisions to return to a violent partner or seek out a new violent partner.

These data also reveal the importance of individualizing treatment for survivors of IPV. Each battered woman has a unique experience that is influenced by a dynamic interplay of personal, relational, social, and cultural factors. Linley and Joseph (2004)'s systematic review of growth following trauma revealed that growth is more likely to occur in individuals who experience helplessness, perceived life threat, and uncontrollability in relation to the trauma, and who cope by utilizing positive reappraisal and engaging in effortful rumination. However, these authors cautioned that a wide range of associations between distress and growth are possible, including both positive and negative associations between the two variables. In addition, it has been found that demographic variables such as minority status can moderate perceptions of growth (Helgeson et al., 2006). Thus, although clinicians should attempt to encourage coping by means of effortful rumination and positive reappraisal, they should also be carefully attuned to individual, relational, social, and cultural factors that may impact coping and outcomes at every stage of treatment.

It may also be important to highlight commonalities in the experiences of battered women, particularly in the beginning of treatment, as a way of educating clients about the cycle of violence. Many women in this sample decided to leave a violent partner after such information was provided to them by individuals with whom they had a supportive relationship. Clinicians who work with battered women should additionally remain apprised of research advances in the area of posttraumatic growth, as much remains to be

understood about the origins of growth and how it relates specifically to other important variables of interest (Park & Helgeson, 2006).

According to Payne, Joseph, & Tudway (2007), there are several other considerations clinicians should take into account when working with trauma survivors. First, when individuals' beliefs shatter in the aftermath of trauma, they often seek to reduce associated distress by quickly attempting to assimilate the trauma. After this occurs, trauma survivors might wish to terminate therapy prematurely, which can leave them vulnerable to future trauma. For this reason, clinicians should caution against premature termination and be aware that such action might constitute an avoidance tactic. Clinicians should be aware that the processes of accommodation and assimilation of trauma are lengthy and can elicit both negative and positive emotions, and warn clients that this process is often cyclical and non-linear. For this reason, clinicians should allow the client to heal on her own terms and on her own timeframe rather than attempting to rush the process of cognitive integration.

As the healing process for battered women is likely to take months or years, clinicians should commit to working with these individuals for a long period of time in order to optimally facilitate resilience and growth. Unfortunately, restrictions in treatment specified by managed care and insurance companies may complicate this process. As such, clinicians should be careful not to abandon clients during particularly difficult times during treatment, as this might leave them at risk to harm themselves or return to an abusive partner. Clinicians should also consider treating battered women on a sliding fee scale or referring them to non-profit agencies who work with battered women on a longer-term basis.

Additionally, efforts should be made on a social level to create and secure more resources for battered women and their children as a way of facilitating further healing. Programs with a mentorship model may be particularly helpful, as many participants in this study noted a desire to help other female survivors of IPV. Such a model might maintain change in women who are further along in the healing process, while facilitating change in women who have only begun to heal from a violent relationship.

Finally, women in this sample did not always seek out counselors during their healing process, and some women who sought out counselors, friends, or family members had negative experiences that deterred them from seeking further professional assistance. As has already been discussed, negative social reactions to the healing process of trauma survivors are associated with increased trauma symptoms (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Fiore, Legerski, Doane, & Pitsenbarger, 2006; Lepore, 2001; Williams & Joseph, 1999; Guay et al., 2006). Nonetheless, a few women reported perceptions that they had grown despite receiving social support from others that they did not view as helpful, perhaps as a result of individual factors which were not explored in this analysis.

When participants experienced positive social support from counselors, friends, or family members, they reported that the benefits of these interactions included others challenging their cognitions, listening to them as they told their stories, and helping them process painful emotions. These findings indicate that it would be optimal for individuals who serve as formal and informal social supports to become educated about how to help battered women in the most supportive fashion possible.

Indeed, the present study revealed that both informal and formal social supporters are capable of providing assistance to battered women that is perceived as helpful.

Therefore, battered women do not necessarily need to seek counseling to heal and grow in the aftermath of a violent relationship. Friends, family members, and future romantic partners can also provide this support and inspire remarkably similar outcomes. This may be because successful formal and informal social supporters provide similar *messages* to battered women. Specifically, more sophisticated messages, such as providing information about the cycle of violence, tended to more definitively influence battered women in this study to decide to leave a violent partner. Ideally, friends and family members would be trained in how to provide such information to battered women, in addition to learning how to listen without judgment and help them to seek resources and secure their safety. This suggestion is based on the finding from the present study that friends and family members who listened to battered women's life circumstances with a non-judgmental attitude were perceived as the most helpful.

Finally, the tenacity of individuals who persisted in their attempts to help a battered woman leave her violent partner was notable in this study. Many women described counselors, friends, and family members who did not give up on them despite their initial refusals for help, or despite their choice to return multiple times to a violent partner. These individuals persisted in their attempts to help women leave a violent partner or to heal in the aftermath of a violent relationship while participants struggled through shame, guilt, self-blame, depression, anxiety, and fear. The fact that so many women credited individuals in their social support network with helping to facilitate their own growth and resilience indicates that it is fruitful for individuals who want to help battered women to be patient and unwavering in their support, whenever such acts are possible.

In particular, as it has been shown that perceived social support is more strongly linked to well-being than actual social support (Cohen & Willis, 1985), it is important that friends and family members ask battered women how they can be of assistance, and attempt to support these women in ways that allow them to feel validated and positively supported. To achieve this purpose, it would be ideal to hold talks about domestic violence in high schools and colleges around the country, as well as to disseminate information via the internet and family assistance clinics.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are several limitations to the present study. Although the qualitative nature of this study reveals that battered women undergo a complex range of dynamic and variable experiences, no definitive conclusions can be made regarding the causes or specific correlates of resilience or growth. Future studies should attempt to further clarify and quantify the relationship between resilience, growth, and a host of individual, social, economic, and cultural factors. Variables of interest might include self-efficacy, level and type of social support, shame and guilt, cultural beliefs about gender roles and relationships, and factors predictive of effective treatment.

In addition, because participants volunteered for this study, there may have been a self-selection bias of women who wanted to come forward to tell their stories. Such women might be considered more growth-oriented individuals by nature because they came of their own free will to discuss and reflect upon painful experiences. For this reason, it may be that resilience and growth were *overestimated* in the current study because of the specific participants who volunteered to talk about their violent relationships.

It may also be that women chose to tell their stories in order to improve their coping skills and/or to decrease distress they had associated with the trauma. As such, their positive re-evaluations may not have reflected *true* change so much as cognitive attempts to *perceive* changes in their functioning. According to cognitive adaptation theory (Taylor, 1983), individuals may report growth when in actuality, they are trying to restore beliefs about safety that were temporarily violated by the trauma. According to this perspective, growth cannot always be distinguished from *positive illusions*, which may not be representative of authentic change. As such, theorists have suggested that future research should take into account the fact that there may be both constructive *and* illusory components of posttraumatic growth (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). In addition, there is a possibility that the principal investigator's expectation of growth may have contributed to findings from the present study (see Appendix B for more information on potential limitations of the principal investigator).

In addition, women in this study tended to be relatively well-educated and primarily Caucasian, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include battered women who are cultural and sexual minorities and/or of all social classes in order to paint a fuller picture of women's experiences. Fortunately, researchers such as Shakespeare-Finch and Copping (2006) have begun to explore the impact of culture on experiences of posttraumatic growth in a qualitative fashion, although more research should be conducted in this country and other countries to determine how cultural factors might impact individuals' perceptions of, and ways of coping with, traumatic events.

Because archival data were mined in this study for the presence of resiliency or growth factors, which were not specifically asked about during the interview, it can be

concluded that the present study likely underestimates the true occurrence of resilience and growth in battered women. In particular, the presence of resilience may have been grossly underestimated because resilience was coded only in women who described returns to previous levels of functioning in their descriptions of positive change. It is possible that many other participants displayed resilience but did not describe it as such because they failed to explain how positive changes in their life constituted a return to previous functioning as opposed to a qualitatively “new” experience (which would have been coded as growth). It is suggested that future researchers ask specific questions aimed at uncovering more detailed information about resiliency and growth both during the stay-leave decision-making process and in the aftermath of violent relationships.

In addition, as discussed earlier, the retrospective temporal nature of this data complicates any definitive conclusions that can be made about growth which occurred during a violent relationship. Women who reflect back on past growth likely do so through different eyes, unless they have not changed at all since the experience occurred. In other words, if women’s schemas had changed or were in the process of changing when they were interviewed, their reflections back to a time when they held different schemas are likely to be viewed through the lens of the new schema. Thus, women’s retrospective reflections might not have accurately captured the distinction between growth during, and growth after, their violent relationships. However, the richness of participants’ descriptions of growth during a violent relationship reveals that significant changes occur in very specific ways that influence women to leave their violent partners.

Finally, the majority of women in this study lived in Montana during their violent relationship. Some women lived in rural areas, others in frontier areas, and still others in

small cities. Although there are likely commonalities in battered women that cut across race, social class, and geography, future researchers should be cautious if they attempt to compare rural and urban women's experiences of growth and resilience.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Select Resilient Women

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Resilience
Anna	21	3	1-2 years ago	Renewed Confidence* / Self-Concept (Identity Renewal)
Claudia	26	3.5	> 3 years ago	Renewed Confidence*
Kari	22	1	> 3 years ago	Renewed Confidence*
Jennifer	26	2.5	2-3 years ago	Strength to Leave Relationship*
Gina	39	10	> 3 years ago	Strength to Leave Relationship*
Emmy	20	2	2-3 years ago	Self-Concept (Identity Renewal)*
Yvette	21	2.5	> 3 years ago	Self-Concept (Identity Renewal)*
Karen	42		1-2 years ago	Self-Concept (Identity Renewal)* / Self-Concept (Identity Renewal)
Donna	47	20	1-2 years ago	Self-Concept (Identity Renewal)* / Self-Concept (Identity Renewal)
Kayla	28	4	> 3 years ago	Self-Concept (Identity Renewal)*
Joan	46	4	2-3 years ago	Self-Concept (Identity Renewal)*
Agnes	53	2.5	> 3 years ago	Self-Concept (Self-Esteem)
Michelle	19	0.92	> 3 years ago	Self-Concept (Self-Esteem) / In Subsequent Relationships
Laura	41	5.5	> 3 years ago	Self-Concept (Self-Esteem)
Georgia	35	12	> 3 years ago	Self-Concept (Renewed Power & Identity Renewal)
Callie	21	3	1-2 years ago	Self-Concept (Renewed Power)

Note. * Denotes resilience that occurred during the process of stay-leave decision-making.

Blank spaces indicate that participants did not provide this information at the time of interview.

Table 1 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Resilience
Isabella	22	2	> 3 years ago	Self-Concept (Identity Renewal)
Cami	24	5	2-3 years ago	Self-Concept (Identity Renewal)
Emily	53	2	> 3 years ago	Self-Concept (Identity Renewal)
Rebecca	36	0.83	> 3 years ago	In Subsequent Relationships / Spirituality/Faith
Hannah	31	0.75	> 3 years ago	In Subsequent Relationships
Staci	37	5	1-2 years ago	In Subsequent Relationships / Spirituality-Faith
Sicily	30	4	> 3 years ago	In Subsequent Relationships
Jacinda	41	21	2-3 years ago	In Subsequent Relationships
Sarah	55	22	> 3 years ago	Spirituality-Faith
Pat	50	2	> 3 years ago	Spirituality-Faith
Shannon	47	6.5	> 3 years ago	Spirituality-Faith

Note. * Denotes resilience that occurred during the process of stay-leave decision-making.

Blank spaces indicate that participants did not provide this information at the time of interview.

Table 2

Characteristics of Select Women who Endorsed Positive Life Changes during the Process of Stay-Leave Decision-Making

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Elizabeth	40	5	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (SS)
Norma	26	1	1-2 years ago	Changes in Relationships (SS) / Changes in Perception of VR (AA) / Intolerance of Abuse (EL)
Sicily*	30	4	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (SS) / Changes in Relationships (PCV)
Joely	43	3.5	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (SS) / Intolerance of Abuse (EL)
Staci*	37	5	1-2 years ago	Changes in Relationships (SS) / Changes in Relationships (PCV) / Intolerance of Abuse (EL)
Emmy *	20	2	2-3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (AS)
Darlene	40	11	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (AS) / Changes in Relationships (TA)
Loretta	18	0.46	1-2 years ago	Changes in Relationships (AS)
Alisa	19	1.5	2-3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (AS)
Yvette*	21	2.5	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (AS) / Changes in Perception of VR (AA)

Note. *denotes participants already mentioned in a previous section

Blank spaces indicate that participants did not provide this information at the time of interview.

SS = support-seeking under difficult circumstances; AS = acceptance of social support despite resistance; TA = time away from abuser that resulted in positive change; PCV = perception of children/others as victims; NF = awareness that abuse was not her fault; VR = violent relationship; AA = awareness of abuse; PP = perception of partner as abusive/acceptance that partner would not change; PL = breaching a physical limit; EL = breaching an emotional limit

Table 2 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Agnes*	53	2.5	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (AS)
Winona	24	3	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (AS) / Changes in Self-Perception (NF) / Changes in Perception of VR (AA)
Heather	22	3	2-3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (TA) / Changes in Perception of VR (AA)
Kari*	22	1	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (TA)
Jane	24	0.83	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (TA)
Anna*	21	3	1-2 years ago	Changes in Relationships (TA) / Changes in Perception of VR (AA) / Intolerance of Abuse (EL)
Holly	35	6	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (TA) / Change in Perception of VR (PP)
Georgia*	35	12	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (TA) / Improved Coping Skills
Sarah*	55	22	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (TA)
Amber	25	2	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (PCV) / Intolerance of Abuse (EL)
Alison	34	4.5	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (PCV)
Betty	45	4	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (PCV)

Note. *denotes participants already mentioned in a previous section

Blank spaces indicate that participants did not provide this information at the time of interview.

SS = support-seeking under difficult circumstances; AS = acceptance of social support despite resistance; TA = time away from abuser that resulted in positive change; PCV = perception of children/others as victims; NF = awareness that abuse was not her fault; VR = violent relationship; AA = awareness of abuse; PP = perception of partner as abusive/acceptance that partner would not change; PL = breaching a physical limit; EL = breaching an emotional limit

Table 2 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Emily*	53	2	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (PCV)
Pat*	50	2	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (PCV) / Changes in Self-Perception (NF) / Intolerance of Abuse (EL)
Christine	25	2	> 3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (PCV)
Jacinda*	41	21	2-3 years ago	Changes in Relationships (PCV) / Changes in Perception of VR (PP)
Brooke	20	1	> 3 years ago	Changes in Self-Perception (NF)
Charlene	45	15	> 3 years ago	Changes in Self-Perception (NF)
Diana	35	1.5	1-2 years ago	Changes in Self-Perception (NF) / Intolerance of Abuse (PL & EL)
Rachel	41	9.5	> 3 years ago	Changes in Self-Perception (NF)
Kate	22	0.71	> 3 years ago	Changes in Self-Perception (NF) / Improved Coping Skills
Alex	45	17	> 3 years ago	Changes in Self-Perception (NF)
Andrea	40	1	> 3 years ago	Changes in Perception of VR (AA)
Wendy	25	2	> 3 years ago	Changes in Perception of VR (AA)/ Changes in Perception of VR (PP)
Michelle*	19	0.92	> 3 years ago	Changes in Perception of VR (AA)
Sophia	19	2	1-2 years ago	Changes in Perception of VR (AA)

Note. *denotes participants already mentioned in a previous section

Blank spaces indicate that participants did not provide this information at the time of interview.

SS = support-seeking under difficult circumstances; AS = acceptance of social support despite resistance; TA = time away from abuser that resulted in positive change; PCV = perception of children/others as victims; NF = awareness that abuse was not her fault; VR = violent relationship; AA = awareness of abuse; PP = perception of partner as abusive/acceptance that partner would not change; PL = breaching a physical limit; EL = breaching an emotional limit

Table 2 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Jessica	20	2.5	2-3 years ago	Changes in Perception of VR (PP)
Karen*	42		1-2 years ago	Changes in Perception of VR (PP)
Eileen	47	21	2-3 years ago	Changes in Perception of VR (PP)
Joree	26	1.5	> 3 years ago	Changes in Perception of VR (PP)
Kim	42	1.5	2-3 years ago	Changes in Perception of VR (PP)
Isabella*	22	2	> 3 years ago	Changes in Perception of VR (PP)
Kristen	42	14	> 3 years ago	Changes in Perception of VR (PP) / Improved Coping Skills
Jennifer*	26	2.5	2-3 years ago	Intolerance of Abuse (PL)
Cindy	51	2	> 3 years ago	Intolerance of Abuse (PL)
Joanne	56	8	> 3 years ago	Intolerance of Abuse (PL)
Susan	46	20	> 3 years ago	Intolerance of Abuse (PL) / Improved Coping Skills
Lauren	24	3	1-2 years ago	Intolerance of Abuse (EL)
Katrina	35	3	> 3 years ago	Intolerance of Abuse (EL)
Amanda	21	5	1-2 years ago	Intolerance of Abuse (EL) / Improved Coping Skills
Beth	45	4	> 3 years ago	Intolerance of Abuse (EL)
Chandra	50	3	> 3 years ago	Intolerance of Abuse (EL)
Kathy	19	0.25	2-3 years ago	Improved Coping Skills

Note. *denotes participants already mentioned in a previous section

Blank spaces indicate that participants did not provide this information at the time of interview.

SS = support-seeking under difficult circumstances; AS = acceptance of social support despite resistance; TA = time away from abuser that resulted in positive change; PCV = perception of children/others as victims; NF = awareness that abuse was not her fault; VR = violent relationship; AA = awareness of abuse; PP = perception of partner as abusive/acceptance that partner would not change; PL = breaching a physical limit; EL = breaching an emotional limit

Table 3

Characteristics of Select Women who Described Posttraumatic Growth

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Years in Relationship</u>	<u>End of Relationship</u>	<u>Type of Growth</u>
Kaitlin	19	1	> 3 years ago	Relationships (RP-LCE)
Jordan	21	1.5	1-2 years ago	Relationships (RP-LCE) / Relationships (Boundaries) / Relationships (Ideals) / Self-Perception (Acceptance)
Charlene*	45	15	> 3 years ago	Relationships (RP-LCE) / Relationships (Help Others) / Self-Perception (Self-Esteem) / Appraisal of Relationship (M)
Jessica*	20	2.5	1-2 years ago	Relationships (RP-LCE) / Appraisal of Relationship (AI) / Religious Beliefs
Diana*	35	1.5	1-2 years ago	Relationships (RP-LCE) / Relationships (Help Others) / Self-Perception (Strength)
Beth*	45	4	> 3 years ago	Relationships (RP-LCE) / Relationships (Boundaries) / Relationships (Friends) / Relationships (Family) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD) / Religious Beliefs

* Participants already mentioned in a previous section

RP = Changed reactions to ex-partner; LCE = Less charged emotional responses; AAD = Awareness of abuse dynamics; M = Deriving meaning from the experience; AI = Acceptance/integration of experience

Table 3 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Jacinda*	41	21	2-3 years ago	Relationships (RP-LCE) / Relationships (Boundaries) / Self-Perception (Self-Esteem) / Appraisal of Relationship (M) / Appraisal of Relationship (AI)
Victoria	44	2	> 3 years ago	Relationships (RP-LCE) / Relationships (Ideals)
Miranda	33	1.5	> 3 years ago	Relationships (RP-LCE) / Relationships (Contentment) Self-Perception (Self-Esteem)
Alex*	45	17	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Compassion) / Relationships (Help Others) / Appraisal of Relationship (M) / Appraisal of Relationship (AI) / Coping
Carmen	19	0.67	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Compassion)
Kayla*	28	4	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Compassion) / Self-Perception (Strength)
Leslie	59	10	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Compassion) / Relationships (Help Others) / Self-Perception (Self-Esteem) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

* Participants already mentioned in a previous section

RP = Changed reactions to ex-partner; LCE = Less charged emotional responses; AAD = Awareness of abuse dynamics; M =

Deriving meaning from the experience; AI = Acceptance/integration of experience;

Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

Table 3 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Gina*	39	10	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Compassion) / Relationships (Support Seeking) / Relationships (Help Others) / Self-Perception (Strength) / Self-Perception (Acceptance) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD) / Coping / Behavior
Sally	49	10.5	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Compassion) / Religious Beliefs
Kari*	22	1	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Compassion) / Relationships (Contentment) Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Darlene*	40	11	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Compassion) / Self-Perception (Acceptance) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Cheryl	40	4.5	1-2 years ago	Relationships (Compassion)
Mickey	55	21	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Boundaries) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Staci*	37	5	1-2 years ago	Relationships (Boundaries) / Self-Perception (Strength) / Appraisal of Relationship (AI)

* Participants already mentioned in a previous section

RP = Changed reactions to ex-partner; LCE = Less charged emotional responses; AAD = Awareness of abuse dynamics; M =

Deriving meaning from the experience; AI = Acceptance/integration of experience;

Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

Table 3 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Claudia*	26	3.5	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Limits) / Self-Perception (Acceptance) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Georgia*	35	12	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Limits) / Self-Perception (Self-Esteem) / Behavior
Nicole	39	18	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Boundaries)
Kathy*	19	0.25	2-3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals)/ Relationships (Limits) / Relationships (Family) / Self-Perception (Identity) / Goals
Winona*	24	3	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals) / Relationships (Friends)
Chandra*	50	3	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals)/ Self-Perception (Self-Esteem)
Melanie	53	8	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals) / Relationships (Help Others) / Self-Perception (Self-Esteem) / Appraisal of Relationship (M)

* Participants already mentioned in a previous section

RP = Changed reactions to ex-partner; LCE = Less charged emotional responses; AAD = Awareness of abuse dynamics; M = Deriving meaning from the experience; AI = Acceptance/integration of experience; Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

Table 3 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Katrina*	35	3	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals) / Relationships (Limits) Self-Perception (Independence) / Self-Perception (Acceptance)
Sophia*	19	2	1-2 years ago	Relationships (Ideals) / Relationships (Support Seeking)
Alisa*	19	1.5	2-3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals) / Relationships (Limits) Relationships (Support Seeking)
Jaclyn	19	1.5	1-2 years ago	Relationships (Ideals)
Janna	30	8	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals)
Peyton	26	6	1-2 years ago	Relationships (Ideals)
Danielle	25	4	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals) / Relationships (Family) / Self-Perception (Strength)
Zoey	37	0.25	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals) / Relationships (Limits)
Holly*	35	6	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals)
Celie	19	0.92	2-3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals)
Tammy	44	10	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals)
Kristen*	42	14	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals) / Appraisal of Relationship (M) / Appraisal of Relationship (AI)

* Participants already mentioned in a previous section

RP = Changed reactions to ex-partner; LCE = Less charged emotional responses; AAD = Awareness of abuse dynamics; M = Deriving meaning from the experience; AI = Acceptance/integration of experience; Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

Table 3 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Kim*	42	1.5	2-3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals) / Relationships (Help Others)
Alana	28	5	1-2 years ago	Relationships (Ideals)
Amber*	25	2	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Ideals) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Andrea*	40	1	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Limits) / Relationships (Support Seeking) Self-Perception (Self-Esteem) / Self-Perception (Acceptance)
Nancy	37	4	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Limits) / Relationships (Help Others)
Shawn	22	2.5	2-3 years ago	Relationships (Limits) / Relationships (Family) / Relationships (Support Seeking) / Relationships (Help Others)
Lynda	23	0.83	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Limits)
Agnes*	53	2.5	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Limits) / Relationships (Help Others) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Joni	39	0.17	2-3 years ago	Relationships (Limits)
Soleil	33		> 3 years ago	Relationships (Limits)
Ellie	21	2.5	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Contentment)
Cassidy	24	0.75	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Contentment)

* Participants already mentioned in a previous section

RP = Changed reactions to ex-partner; LCE = Less charged emotional responses; AAD = Awareness of abuse dynamics; M = Deriving meaning from the experience; AI = Acceptance/integration of experience; Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

Table 3 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Brooke*	20	1	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Friends) / Behavior
Anna*	21	3	1-2 years ago	Relationships (Family)
Joely*	43	3.5	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Family)/ Relationships (Seeking Support)/ Relationships (Help Others) / Self-Perception (Acceptance) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Pat*	50	2	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Family)
Karen*	42		1-2 years ago	Relationships (Seeking Support) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD) / Appraisal of Relationship (AI) / Coping
Cami*	24	5	2-3 years ago	Relationships (Seeking Support) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD) / Appraisal of Relationship (M)
Jennifer*	26	2.5	2-3 years ago	Relationships (Support Seeking) / Relationships (Contentment) Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

* Participants already mentioned in a previous section

RP = Changed reactions to ex-partner; LCE = Less charged emotional responses; AAD = Awareness of abuse dynamics; M = Deriving meaning from the experience; AI = Acceptance/integration of experience; Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

Table 3 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Courtney	36	3	2-3 years ago	Relationships (Support Seeking) / Self-Perception (Self-Esteem) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD) / Coping
Rebecca*	36	0.83	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Support Seeking) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Michelle*	19	0.92	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Help Others) / Self-Perception (Self-Esteem) / Self-Perception (Strength) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Norma*	26	1	1-2 years ago	Relationships (Help Others) / Self-Perception (Self-Esteem) / Self-Perception (Independence) / Goals
Susan*	46	20	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Help Others) / Self-Perception (Acceptance) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD) / Appraisal of Relationship (M) / Religious Beliefs
Amy	26	2	1-2 years	Relationships (Help Others)
Kate*	22	0.71	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Help Others)
Candace	19	0.58	1-2 years ago	Relationships (Help Others) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

* Participants already mentioned in a previous section

RP = Changed reactions to ex-partner; LCE = Less charged emotional responses; AAD = Awareness of abuse dynamics; M = Deriving meaning from the experience; AI = Acceptance/integration of experience; Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

Table 3 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Joanne*	56	8	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Help Others)
Trista	33		> 3 years ago	Relationships (Help Others) / Goals
Sicily*	30	4	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Help Others) / Self-Perception (Acceptance) / Self-Perception (Identity)
Abby	21	2.5	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Help Others)
Cindy*	51	2	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Help Others)
Molly	25	0.5	2-3 years ago	Self-Perception (Self-Esteem) / Self-Perception Strength) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Emmy*	20	2	2-3 years ago	Self-Perception (Self-Esteem) / Self-Perception (Acceptance) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Heather*	22	3	2-3 years ago	Self-Perception (Self-Esteem) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Wanda	55	5	> 3 years ago	Self-Perception (Self-Esteem)
Amanda	21	5	1-2 years ago	Self-Perception (Self-Esteem)
Britney	25	0.5	2-3 years ago	Self-Perception (Strength)
Alison*	34	4.5	> 3 years ago	Self-Perception (Strength)
Chloe	24	0.75	> 3 years ago	Self-Perception (Independence) / Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

* Participants already mentioned in a previous section

RP = Changed reactions to ex-partner; LCE = Less charged emotional responses; AAD = Awareness of abuse dynamics; M = Deriving meaning from the experience; AI = Acceptance/integration of experience; Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

Table 3 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Emily*	53	2	> 3 years ago	Self-Perception (Independence) / Coping
Lindsey	50	16	> 3 years ago	Self-Perception (Acceptance) / Appraisal of Relationship (AI) / Coping / Behavior
Belinda	41	1	2-3 years ago	Self-Perception (Acceptance)
Sonja	46	1.5	1-2 years ago	Self-Perception (Identity) / Appraisal of Relationship (M) / Goals
Lauren*	24	3	1-2 years ago	Self-Perception (Identity)
Wendy*	25	2	> 3 years ago	Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Paula	36	10	> 3 years ago	Appraisal of Relationship (AAD) / Behavior
Joan*	46	4	2-3 years ago	Appraisal of Relationship (AAD) / Goals
Donna*	47	20	1-2 years ago	Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Sarah*	55	22	> 3 years ago	Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Callie*	21	3	1-2 years ago	Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Sorelle	21	1.2	2-3 years ago	Appraisal of Relationship (AAD) / Appraisal of Relationship (AI) / Coping
Rachel*	41	9.5	> 3 years ago	Appraisal of Relationship (AAD) / Appraisal of Relationship (AI)

* Participants already mentioned in a previous section

RP = Changed reactions to ex-partner; LCE = Less charged emotional responses; AAD = Awareness of abuse dynamics; M = Deriving meaning from the experience; AI = Acceptance/integration of experience; Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

Table 3 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Relationship	End of Relationship	Type of Growth
Leila	27	3	> 3 years ago	Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)
Isabella*	22	2	> 3 years ago	Appraisal of Relationship (M)
Lorna	39	0.17	2-3 years ago	Appraisal of Relationship (M)
Hannah*	31	0.75	> 3 years ago	Relationships (Contentment) / Appraisal of Relationship (M)

* Participants already mentioned in a previous section

RP = Changed reactions to ex-partner; LCE = Less charged emotional responses; AAD = Awareness of abuse dynamics; M = Deriving meaning from the experience; AI = Acceptance/integration of experience; Appraisal of Relationship (AAD)

Appendix A

Demographics Form

ID# _____

We would like some general background information about you and your partner who has been violent. If the violence occurred in a past relationship, please provide information about that partner and your relationship.

1. a. In the past, have you ever been married, lived as a couple, or dated someone who has shoved, slapped, hit, or kicked you, or physically hurt or threatened you in some other way? **Please refer to the most recent violent relationship you have been in.**
(Check one)
 ____ No, not in the past (**If no, talk to interviewer**)
 ____ Yes, was married but now separated ____ Yes, was living as a couple
 ____ Yes, was married but now divorced ____ Yes, dating
- b. If yes, how long were you in this relationship?
 ____ Years Less than a year? ____ Months ____ Not applicable
- c. If yes, did you ever leave your partner who had been violent? ____ Yes ____ No
 How many times did you leave your violent partner? ____
- d. How long ago did this relationship end? (Check one)
 ____ Less than 1 month ago ____ 1 to 2 years ago
 ____ 1 month to 6 months ago ____ 2 to 3 years ago
 ____ 6 months to 1 year ago ____ Over three years ago

 If over three years ago, how many years ago did the relationship end? ____ Years
- e. Have you been in other violent relationships in the past? ____ Yes ____ No
 If yes, how many? ____

For the remainder of the questions, please refer to your most recent past violent relationship.

2. How long ago did the last violent incident occur? (Please fill in one blank with a number)
 ____ Days ago ____ Months ago ____ Years ago
3. Where were you living at the time of the violence? (Check one)
 ____ In a town/city ____ Out in the country ____ Both

4. a. Do you still have contact with your partner who has been violent? __Yes__No

b. If yes, how often do you still have contact? (Check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> Daily	<input type="checkbox"/> Once every couple of months
<input type="checkbox"/> 4 to 5 days per week	<input type="checkbox"/> Once every six months
<input type="checkbox"/> 2 to 3 days per week	<input type="checkbox"/> Once a year
<input type="checkbox"/> Once a week	<input type="checkbox"/> Once every two years
<input type="checkbox"/> Once a month	<input type="checkbox"/> Less often: please specify _____

c. If yes, how would you rate your level of stress surrounding these meetings?

1	2	3	4	5
Not stressful	Somewhat stressful	Moderately stressful	Very stressful	Extremely stressful

d. If yes, how would you rate your level of fear surrounding these meetings?

1	2	3	4	5
Not fearful	Somewhat fearful	Moderately fearful	Very fearful	Extremely fearful

e. Is violence still involved? _____ Yes _____ No

f. For what reasons do you still have contact with your partner who has been violent?

5. Your age now? _____

6. a. Your gender? (Circle one) M F

b. The gender of your partner who has been violent?(Circle one) M F

7. Your education completed? (Check one) Your partner's education? (Check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> Eighth grade or less	<input type="checkbox"/> Eighth grade or less
<input type="checkbox"/> Some high school/GED	<input type="checkbox"/> Some high school/GED
<input type="checkbox"/> High school graduate	<input type="checkbox"/> High school graduate
<input type="checkbox"/> Some college/vocational school	<input type="checkbox"/> Some college/vocational school
<input type="checkbox"/> College graduate	<input type="checkbox"/> College graduate
<input type="checkbox"/> Some graduate school	<input type="checkbox"/> Some graduate school
<input type="checkbox"/> Graduate degree	<input type="checkbox"/> Graduate degree

8. Are you currently employed? Was your partner employed?

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, full-time	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, full-time
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, part-time	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, part-time
<input type="checkbox"/> Homemaker	<input type="checkbox"/> Homemaker
<input type="checkbox"/> No, unemployed	<input type="checkbox"/> No, unemployed
<input type="checkbox"/> Student only	<input type="checkbox"/> Student only
<input type="checkbox"/> Student and employed	<input type="checkbox"/> Student and employed

9. Were you employed at the time that the violence took place? (Check one)
 _____ Yes, full-time _____ Yes, part-time _____ Homemaker
 _____ No, unemployed _____ Student only _____ Student and employed
10. If you were employed, what was your occupation (at the time of the violence?)

11. If he was employed, what was the occupation of your partner while you were together? _____
 What is his occupation currently? _____
12. How many children did you have at the time of this relationship? _____
 If any, what are their ages/genders? ____/____/____/____/____/____/____/____
 How many children were born out of this relationship? _____
 How many lived at home during the violence? _____
 How many children do you have now? _____
 If any, what are their ages/genders? ____/____/____/____/____/____/____/____

If you do not have any children, please skip to #15.

13. If you do have children, how many are still living with you at home? _____
 If any, what are their ages/genders? ____/____/____/____/____/____/____/____
14. a. If you had children at the time of the violent relationship, did they see the violence between you and your partner?
 _____ Yes _____ No
- b. If yes, what do you think were the effects of seeing the violence for your children?

- c. If yes, have your children received any services related to the exposure to the violence?
 _____ None _____ Support groups
 _____ Shelter activities _____ Therapy/counseling
 _____ Foster care/group home placement _____ School counseling
 _____ Other: Please specify _____
- d. If yes, have you talked to your children about the violence?
 _____ Yes _____ No What did you tell them about the violence?

- e. Do your children still have contact with your partner who has been violent?
 _____ Yes _____ No
 If yes, how often do they have contact? (Check one)
 _____ Daily _____ Once every couple of months
 _____ 4 to 5 days per week _____ Once every six months
 _____ 2 to 3 days per week _____ Once a year
 _____ Once a week _____ Once every two years
 _____ Once a month _____ Less often: Please specify _____
15. What was your own annual income before taxes during the violent relationship you were in? (Check one)
- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| _____ None | If you do not know your annual income,
how much did you make per hour?
_____ |
| _____ \$5,000 or less | |
| _____ \$5,001 to \$10,000 | How many hours per week did you work?
_____ |
| _____ \$10,001 to \$15,000 | |
| _____ \$15,001 to \$20,000 | |
| _____ \$20,001 to \$25,000 | |
| _____ \$25,001 to \$30,000 | |
| _____ \$30,001 to \$35,000 | |
| _____ \$35,001 to \$40,000 | |
| _____ \$40,001 to \$45,000 | |
| _____ \$45,001 to \$50,000 | |
| _____ More than \$50,000 | |
16. What was your annual family income before taxes during the violent relationship you were in? (Check one)
- | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| _____ None | _____ \$5,000 or less |
| _____ \$5,001 to \$10,000 | _____ \$10,001 to \$15,000 |
| _____ \$15,001 to \$20,000 | _____ \$20,001 to \$25,000 |
| _____ \$25,001 to \$30,000 | _____ \$30,001 to \$35,000 |
| _____ \$35,001 to \$40,000 | _____ \$40,001 to \$45,000 |
| _____ \$45,001 to \$50,000 | _____ More than \$50,000 |
17. Who was the primary breadwinner during the violent relationship? (Check one)
 _____ You _____ Your violent partner _____ Other
18. Your race? (Check one)
- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| _____ White | _____ African-American |
| _____ Hispanic | _____ Asian |
| _____ American Indian | _____ Other (If more than one, please list) |
19. The race of your partner who has been violent? (Check one)
- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| _____ White | _____ African-American |
| _____ Hispanic | _____ Asian |
| _____ American Indian | _____ Other (If more than one, please list) |

20. a. To what degree did you access each of these resources? Circle the number that best applies.

1 = Not at all
 2 = Very little
 3 = Somewhat
 4 = Often
 5 = Very much

Friends?	1	2	3	4	5
Family?	1	2	3	4	5
Legal services?	1	2	3	4	5
Police?	1	2	3	4	5
Counseling/therapy?	1	2	3	4	5
Shelter (BWS)?	1	2	3	4	5
Support groups?	1	2	3	4	5
Church?	1	2	3	4	5
Financial?	1	2	3	4	5
Medical?	1	2	3	4	5
Vocational/ job-related help?	1	2	3	4	5
Crisis helpline?	1	2	3	4	5
Neighbor?	1	2	3	4	5

- b. How helpful were each of these resources? Circle N/A if you did not seek services from these resources. Circle the number that best applies.

1 = Not at all
 2 = Very little
 3 = Somewhat
 4 = Often
 5 = Very much

Friends?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Family?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Legal services?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Police?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Counseling/therapy?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Shelter (BWS)?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Support groups?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Church?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Financial?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Medical?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Vocational/ job-related help?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Crisis helpline?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Neighbor?	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

- c. If you did not access some or all of these supports, please tell us any helpful information about why you did not.

Thank you.

Domestic Violence Interview

Interviewer _____ Location _____ ID# _____

We are studying women's experience of violent relationships and your responses, needs, and beliefs. We understand that talking about the relationship may be difficult for you. Feel free to take your time and to present information as best as you are able. Also know that you can take a break, ask questions, or let us know any particular needs and/or feelings you may experience while being interviewed.

1. Please tell me about the (violent) relationship you (are/were) in:

- a. When did the violence begin?
- b. (Have you/did you) ever (left/leave)? Y N (If so, go to 2; if not, go to 3).
 - b1. Temporarily or permanently? (Circle).
 _____ # of times (if temp) _____ # of times (if perm)

2. a. If you ever left your partner, where did you go?

Friend Relative Shelter/Motel/Hotel Other N/A

b. If you left more than one time, what would you describe as the reason(s) for returning?

Love Fear Financial Children Family
 Religion Personal beliefs Friend Peer pressure Other
 N/A

c. If you left permanently, what would you describe as the reason(s) you left for good?

Love Fear Financial Children Family
 Religion Personal beliefs Friend Peer pressure Other
 N/A

d. If you left temporarily, what would you describe as the reason(s) you left?

Love Fear Financial Children Family
 Religion Personal beliefs Friend Peer pressure Other
 N/A

e. Was there a turning point for you in your decision...a specific situation or realization that might have occurred? Y N

What?

f. (Have you/did you) ever (threatened/threaten) to leave?

Never Once Sometimes Often

g. **If the woman has children, ask:

What role do you think your children played in your decision?

3. a. ***Only ask this question if it appears that they are still in the violent relationship.

What would you describe as your reason(s) for staying in the relationship?

Love	Fear	Financial	Children	Family
Religion	Personal beliefs	Friend	Peer pressure	Other
N/A				

4. (Is there/was there) anything that (would change/would have changed) your mind about staying/leaving? Y N

If so, what?

5. Was there any violence in your family when you were growing up? Y N

Did the violence include sexual abuse? Y N

Of whom/by whom?

Any violence outside your family? Y N

Did the violence include sexual abuse? Y N

Of whom/by whom? Y N

6. Do you have anyone that you (seek/sought) support from or talk to about the relationship?

Y N

Who?

Family	Friend	Therapist	Religious Leader
Shelter Staff	Support Group	Other	

7. (Has your/was your) family been supportive? Y N

What have they done?

8. Have your friends been supportive? Y N

What have they done?

9. Have you sought any community support specifically in regard to your relationship?

Y N

What? (Legal, Battered Women's Shelter, Counseling, Religious, Financial, etc.)

Where?

From whom?

10. If you sought counseling, was it helpful? Y N

Why or why not?

(If not already clear, ask): How was it helpful?

11. Which of the supports have been the most helpful for you?

(Legal, Battered Women's Shelter, Counseling, Religious, Financial, Friends, Family)

Why?

12. (Is/was) there anything or anyone that interfered with you accessing community resources? Y N

Who or what?

13. Are there any sources of support that you would not turn to again? Y N

Why?

14. Have you ever felt the need to keep the violence a secret from others? Y N

Who?

Why?

15. Who did you first disclose your abuse to?

How long after the start of the violence?

If not immediate, what kept you from telling anyone?

16. What (do you/did you) do to keep yourself safe or protect yourself?

17. **If they have not told you specifically about the nature of the physical violence (pushed, slapped, hit, kicked), ask NOW:

Would you feel comfortable telling me exactly what was the nature of the physical violence you (experience/experienced)?

Have you ever needed medical attention due to this violence?

18. (Do you/did you) have a limit to what behavior you would tolerate in your relationship? Y N

(If yes:) What?

Was your limit expressed to your partner? Y N

(If yes:) When? With what consequences?

19. (Are/were) either you or your partner involved with drugs or alcohol? Y N

(if yes:) Who?

What role do you think they (play/played)?

20. (Are/were) either you or your partner experiencing any particular stress? Y N

(If yes:) What?

21. **If you are unsure if she has children, ask now. If she does, ask:

During pregnancy, was there any change in the level of violence? Y N

How?

22. (Are/were) there specific reasons that the violence would occur? Y N

Could you give me examples?

23. What are your feelings for your partner at the present time?

24. **If they have left their relationship, ask the following questions:
- Do you still have contact with your partner? Y N
 - How much?
 - What is it like for you?
 - (If they have any children, add:) Do your children (does your child) still have contact with your partner? Y N
 - How much?
 - What is that like for them? How do they feel about it?
 - What is that like for you?
25. What do you believe would be most helpful for you in regards to this/that relationship at this time?
26. What influence do you believe this/that relationship has had on you?
27. a. Have you ever experienced a sense of shame related to this (violent) relationship?
Y N
(**If yes, continue. If not, go on to #27f).
- To what would you credit those feelings of shame? (If she seems confused, say "What do you think was the cause of those feelings of shame?")
 - What role, if any, has shame played in your experience?
 - In leaving the relationship?
 - In seeking help from others?
 - In talking to others?
 - What (could have helped/could help) to decrease your feelings of shame?
 - Are you currently experiencing feelings of shame? Y N
(If no, go on to #27e(2)).
- What level on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = no shame and 10 = complete shame)?
 - What level of shame did you experience during the relationship on a scale from 1 to 10?
 - (Skip this if answered no to 27e). Why do you think you are experiencing shame right now?
 - What is your definition of shame?
28. a. Have you ever experienced guilt related to this (violent relationship?) Y N
(If yes, continue. If no, go on to #28f).
- To what would you credit these feelings of guilt? (If she seems confused, say "What do you think was the cause of these feelings of guilt?")
 - What role, if any, has guilt played in your experience?
 - In leaving the relationship?
 - In seeking help from others?
 - In talking to others?

d. What (could have helped/could help) to decrease your feelings of guilt?

e. Are you currently experiencing feelings of guilt? Y N

(If no, go on to #28e(2)).

(1) What level on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = no guilt and 10 = complete guilt)?

(2) What level of guilt did you experience during the relationship on a scale from 1 to 10?

(3) (Skip this if answered no to 27e). Why do you think you are experiencing guilt right now?

f. What is your definition of guilt?

g. In your opinion, do shame and guilt differ? Y N

If yes, how do they differ?

29. We have completed the interview.

Do you have anything that you would like to add that I did not ask about?

30. If we were to do a follow-up study on the effects of DV on children, would you be willing to participate? Y N

In your opinion, what would be the best way to recruit women and their children for that study?

31. Do you have any questions? Concerns? Y N

If yes, what questions/concerns do you have?

How are you feeling right now?

Appendix B

Several potential limitations on the part of the principal investigator may have impacted the findings. First, the principal investigator's long history with the Domestic Violence Project not only inspired the project, but may have partially biased the findings. As a post-baccalaureate student who conducted and transcribed interviews for the Domestic Violence Project in 1999, Ms. Young was almost immediately impressed by the strength and resilience of the battered women who were interviewed for the project. Her research on battered women led to an interest in different types of aggression, and in particular, the types of aggression that women perpetrate against each other. In 2005, she completed her master's project on the subject of relational aggression, gender role identification, and psychopathology in college students. As part of her clinical training, she worked with children and teenagers at a local battered women's shelter, and again became reminded of how survivors of IPV can learn to rebuild their lives and even thrive in the aftermath of tremendous trauma. After teaching a course on the psychology of family violence, Melissa was inspired to learn more about positive psychology and what facilitates healing in the aftermath of trauma. The idea for this dissertation emerged from the above interests, as well as a recollection that many women who were interviewed for the Domestic Violence Project had reported a desire to help other women, in addition to describing new directions their lives had taken after they left a violent partner. Thus, it may be that the expectation of positive findings biased the principal investigator in the creation of categories and subcategories of resilience and growth.